

jcannonbooks

Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



Thousands of men got off trains and cycled through the U.S. Army's Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois, during World War II, and in the summer of 1942, at least two dozen were assigned to the 95th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop. Trains don't stop here anymore, but there's still a sign. The Army is long gone from the land, most of which is now the Chicago Rockford International Airport.

Block by block

Writer's block looks like this:

But I don't have that problem. I have sentences, paragraphs, chapters, the works. I am writing a book, as I told you a year ago, and I mentioned then that I would share what happens along the way. No writer's block, thank you for asking, but I was slow out of the starting blocks. Last December, I was revving the engine with the gearshift in neutral. I had what some might call a concept of a plan. But in the summer, I realized it was time. I once heard playwright Edward Albee speak in Aurora, Illinois, a place you would not expect to find Edward Albee, but there he was. He said that after thinking long enough about a project, mulling snippets of dialogue, and letting scenes and themes coalesce in his head, he eventually realized he was "with play." He was American literature nobility, and I am a serf, but the difference does not proscribe appreciation of a good gestation analogy. When I knew I was with nonfiction, chapters started appearing. They must be honed and more need to be written, but there in a Word file, a copy of which I store in four places to prevent the

unthinkable, many worthy sentences await. A switch is flipped, neural networks are firing, and I know the book's shape and substance.

I report to you that during some writing sessions, an event occurs that I do not understand. I slide into a place where I fail to notice time, hunger, or responsibility. It is not common or predictable, and I'm sure it happens to others besides me. In front of you is writing that didn't exist a few hours earlier. It is what you want to say, the sentences have strength, the words show not a touch of dreary predictability, and you can't quite remember writing them. Peace and endorphins are upon you. It is the English Major's Reward, a fleeting but fulfilling sign from the universe that writing can pay dividends, even if it won't cover the rent.*

Obstacles do surface at times. I have so many things to write about in this book exploring the lives of men who served in a small combat unit during World War II that I can't always find the notes I need. I am a fan of precision (as you should be), so it annoys me to realize that I did not catalog material more carefully early in the research. What has slowed me down is locating something I know I have but can't remember exactly where it is. I have Word files, PDFs, interview transcripts, and Excel spreadsheets with highlights, notebooks with hand-drawn stars on important items, scribbled reminders on outlines, Post-Its and color-coded-by-subject sticky flags in books, and whatever else I can think of to remind myself not to overlook particular bits. But some things I collected are primary source items, such as handwritten, unpublished memoirs and eighty-year-old letters that exist only on paper and resist a computer's search function. So, if I failed to attach a flag on a page, I hunt. Where did I stash that?

Sitting here several months since ignition, I have a chunk of a book that looks closely at things most World War II combat veterans declined to discuss. The focus is on the 95th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop, but it could have been about any small outfit at the front, in any service, in practically any war. The book is part long-form journalism and part history. It is homage, but not hagiography. It's like a Rick Atkinson book but shorter. It's like a Ron Chernow biography without a famous subject. It's like a Bill Bryson book with less jokey stuff. It's like reading a long piece in a respectable East Coast magazine without any wry cartoons. It is history that seeks to attract people who usually would not read history, although it will have hundreds of endnotes in a crimped typeface that will cross your eyes and prove my scholarship. (You could skip those if you want.) It is storytelling that focuses on those who served in combat eighty-some years ago and did not talk much (or ever) about what they experienced. It is about soldiers' lives more than battlefield maneuvers, although you'll get enough of the broad view to know what's happening. Combat vets are famously and understandably reticent about discussing those days unless you served along

with them. This book looks at 148 men (and replacements) whose mostly ordinary American lives were upended in ways they could not have imagined. About a dozen of the men carry the weight of the story. What if they had talked about what they endured? This book presents rare glimpses and fits them into the narrative of a generation.

At its heart, this book is about the intersection of memory and communication. It is about what we know and whether we share. It is about the power of stories and the wistful realization that we can never know them all.

I can hear you asking: Why in the name of George S. Patton is this taking so long? Answer: I have been unable to adjust to a world where ridiculous, invented, and harmful stuff is presented as worthy of belief. It makes me gag. I have retained an old-fashioned allegiance to verifiable facts and credible sources, as you have. I couldn't write until I was sure that what I had to offer was as close to true as anyone could make it. I needed two and a half years (and counting) to collect and test the information that makes this book unique. I realized early on I would have to devote a substantial amount of time to search across the U.S. (and Canada, in one case) for families of 95th Reconnaissance Troop veterans and interview them, sometimes repeatedly and sometimes to the point of making myself a pest; for visits to Illinois, Wisconsin, the Mojave Desert, Oklahoma, Kansas, France, and the Netherlands to talk to people and examine nondigitized documents in archives and private collections; for identifying and interviewing experts; for answers to my Freedom of Information Act requests; and for reading, so much reading.

But did I tell you I really enjoy research?

**For more on the mystery and magic of reporting and writing, do yourself a favor and read Joyride by Susan Orlean.*

Not in the cards

At this time of year, I put the final touches on a Christmas card that is built upon a photo I have taken. It's a tradition of at least twenty-five years, but it's on hiatus so I can focus on the book. So if you are expecting a card and don't see it, it's not because I don't like you. It's because I'm ignoring you.

But traditions die hard. How about another look at a photo I took and used on a card a few years back? I made this image (actually a composite of about eighty

images) at Joshua Tree National Park, and it may be my favorite of the card efforts.



So, ere he drives out of sight,

Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night.

Kind regards

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