

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": Spotlight on MilSpeak and Middle West Presses

Major publishing house enthusiasm for war, mil, and vet-themed books has noticeably waned in the past few years, but two small presses, MilSpeak Foundation and Middle West Press, have emerged to fill much of the void. Between them MilSpeak and Middle West have recently published a remarkable number of interesting titles by new and established vet and vet-adjacent authors: MilSpeak published six titles in 2022 alone, with more coming this year, while Middle West has been nearly as prolific. The energetic output reflects the passion and vision of MilSpeak and Middle West's current executives, Tracy Crow and Randy Brown, respectively, both veterans and accomplished authors themselves. The vet-writer community is something of a subculture and vet-writing is something of a genre, but subcultures and genres require material manifestation. In this regard, MilSpeak and Middle West are carrying far more than their fair share of the load by publishing so much mil-writing. Frankly, their presence, let alone their accomplishment, within the contemporary war-writing scene has been a blessing. We are lucky to have them.

Tracy Crow is a former Marine and college writing instructor whose memoir *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine* and craft-guide *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Memoir* are well-worth pursuing. As good as these books are, I'm even more struck by Crow's publishing vision and eye for talent—she seems motivated by recognition that there is a surfeit of talent in the war-writing community that is underserved by the publishing industry. I first met Crow in 2018 at the War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air

Force Academy, which featured an astonishing number of contemporary vet-and-mil authors. Crow may well have been recruiting, for a number of authors present at the conference have since been published by MilSpeak or have books on the way.

Randy Brown, aka “Charlie Sherpa,” is also a contemporary war-writing plank-holder, early-on offering war-writing commentary on his blog Red Bull Rising and frequently organizing panels at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference. In those early years, Brown was still in uniform in the Iowa National Guard, with whom he later deployed to Afghanistan post-service as an embedded journalist. Along the line, Brown stood-up Middle West Press as an outlet first for his own writing. Soon came his poetry volume *Welcome to FOB Haiku* and then *Twelve O’Clock Haiku*, as well as the vet-writing anthologies *Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War* and *Our Best War Stories*. Later came titles by other vets and fellow-travelers, with an emphasis on poetry, and more vet-centric anthologies.

I recently asked Crow and Brown to answer a short set of questions about their enterprises, and each responded fulsomely with shrewd and entertaining responses. Their stories offer lively insights into military press publishing and each is packed with guidance for aspiring writers. Crow answered each of my questions as I proposed them, while Brown composed a narrative that riffs on my questions. Read them below, please, and join me in saluting their efforts:



Interview with Tracy Crow, President of MilSpeak Foundation

When you became President of MilSpeak, what was your sense of its potential? What was your vision for it?

My vision for MilSpeak is constantly evolving. In 2017 when I became president, my vision was limited to relaunching the Foundation's dormant writing workshop component. I'd already been leading workshops for women veterans and women military family members when MilSpeak's founder, Sally Parmer, a retired, disabled Marine Corps veteran, encouraged me to merge my workshop program with the Foundation's. A year later, we secured the Foundation's first grant, which was from Wounded Warrior Project® for the funding of two weekend writing retreats for women veterans and family members that could accommodate 200 participants and 11 faculty, each of whom was a vet or spouse with creative writing teaching experience and published books.

But Sally's vision when she founded MilSpeak in 2009 had included *two* components—writing workshops and book publishing. Her retired status had afforded her the time to manage both from 2009 to 2013, and MilSpeak's titles from this era are still available on our archived website and on Smashwords. In 2020, I received an unexpected, generous donation from a friend who had seen me lead workshops and wanted to fund

others; when I suggested we use her donation to relaunch the Foundation's publishing component, she was overjoyed to do so, and has been actively involved ever since as our CFO.

In 2022, MilSpeak released 6 books in paperback and ebook formats, and will release 5 in 2023, and at least 4 in 2024. Meanwhile, we continue to offer writing workshops, mostly online since the start of the pandemic.

Today my vision for the Foundation is so much larger than I'd dared to dream in 2017. Using Graywolf Press as a model, I hope to evolve MilSpeak Books and our newest imprint, Family of Light Books, as presses recognized for their artful efforts to explore and elevate our understanding of human consciousness.

What are the rewards of being a small-press publisher?

The rewards are numerous. The greatest reward, however, is being able to say yes to a writer with a meaningful, high-quality manuscript who has felt marginalized and shut out by other traditional publishers, and then the collaboration with that writer from copyediting to cover design, and beyond. Our team of freelance editors and designers work hard to ensure our authors enjoy every aspect of their publishing experience.

What catches your eye in regard to proposals/drafts submitted to you for possible publication?

While MilSpeak publishes books authored by veterans and family members, not all our books are *about* the military or even mention the military. Our mission is to support the creative endeavors from within our community, period. However, the quality of the manuscript—and I'm referring to everything from sentence level writing to use of sensory language, pacing, character development, and a narrative arc—determines whether we'll make an offer.

We've published an excellent coming-of-age debut memoir by

Norris Comer, a military family member, who spent his first summer after high school graduation salmon fishing in Alaska, and earned a lifetime of lessons. His memoir, *Salmon in the Seine: Alaskan Memories of Life, Death, & Everything In-Between*, has received so many awards this year I've lost count.

Another family member, Karen Donley-Hayes, reveals the heartbreaking story in her debut memoir, *Falling Off Horses*, of a friendship that began in high school over a mutual love for horses that survives numerous falls, a rollercoaster of love losses and triumphs, and finally, a heartbreaking diagnosis of a fatal illness.

Navy spouse, Samantha Otto Brown, author of the debut memoir, *Sub Wife: A Memoir From The Homefront*, lifts the curtain on nuclear submarine life, revealing how she and fellow wives keep themselves afloat during the occasional excruciating silence during their husbands' sub deployments.

Amber Jensen, wife of a National Guardsman, reveals the loneliness of pregnancy when her husband is deployed to Iraq, and the marital strains for a couple when a loved one returns from deployment, forever changed, in her debut memoir, *The Smoke of You: A Memoir of Love During & After Deployment*.

Our new imprint, Family of Light Books, has released a brilliant young adult novel, *American Delphi*, by military family member M.C. Armstrong, in which his main character, fifteen-year-old Zora Box, sets out to discover the true history of her family, including her father's secretive military mission, and finds herself at the center of an activist movement with international hashtag status following the tragic death of her best friend, a trans-teen. The Greensboro, North Carolina, Library selected *American Delphi* for its summer reading program, and Kirkus Review described the book as "An intriguing kaleidoscope...compelling...An engaging story of current events and social justice for teen

readers.”

And of course we’ve published books written by veterans about the military experience, such as Lauren Kay Johnson’s memoir, *The Fine Art of Camouflage*, about her service in Afghanistan as a public affairs officer, Kevin C. Jones’s short-story collection, *Collateral Damage*; RLynn Johnson’s debut novel, *Cry of the Heart*; and Jennifer Orth-Veillon’s collection, *Beyond Their Limits of Longing: Contemporary Writers & Veterans on the Lingering Stories of WWI*.

What have you learned about trying to market war-and-military themed books? What do books about war-and-military themes have to offer a general reading public?

As for the actual marketing, MilSpeak supports its authors and their releases as best as our financial and personnel resources allow, but we’ve also discovered that the most successful approach *for us* tends to follow an organic unfolding. I can’t say enough about the unwavering support from the military writing community, and this includes military publications as well. Our authors have also appeared on local television programming, podcasts, book clubs, book fairs, etc.

From a business aspect, MilSpeak boosts the success potential of its releases by offering the same wholesale discount to retailers as the large traditional publishers offer, and the same return policy for unsold books. Not many small presses can do this if they’re profit driven. As a nonprofit, everything from our sales after paying royalties to our authors gets earmarked for the publication process of another book by a veteran and family member.

I’ve been closely examining the cross-generational impact of military service for more than a decade now, especially the impact of combat service on families. My sincere hope is that human consciousness will more quickly evolve toward conflict

resolution that never includes war, and so our books tend to reflect the lesser known, yet gut-wrenching, aspects of how and why our world mindset seems trapped inside a warmongering matrix.

What MilSpeak titles are forthcoming? What is exciting about them?

In the fall, we're releasing two novels:

Releasing October 15 is *The Waiting World*, by Andria Williams, author of *The Longest Night* that earned a starred Kirkus Review, and that Entertainment Weekly described as "A stunning debut." In *The Waiting World*, Andria takes us back to the era just after WWI, and explores the seedy underworld of an American business tycoon, and that of his two Irish servant girls and their chauffeur-friend who are intent on forging a life on their terms, no matter the risks.

Releasing November 15 is *Changelings: Insurgence*, a captivating science-fiction thriller by Navy veteran and Cal Poly Pomona professor, Liam Corley, who shares that he drew from his experiences as a humanities professor and his overseas deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq to portray a futuristic world with a potentially harmful outcome for humanity *if* it eliminates what makes it truly human.

Spring 2024, we're releasing three titles—*The Celdan Heresies* (a fantasy) by Megan Carnes; *Shoalie's Crow* (a young adult novel by Karen Donley-Hayes); and *Hills Hide Mountains* (a novel) by Travis Klempan.

Fall 2024, we're releasing a collection of essays and poems about a family's cross-generational military service, *The Indignity of Knowing*, by University of Tennessee-Knoxville professor, Amber Nicole Albritton.



Randy Brown on the history and vision of Middle West Press:

I started Middle West Press as a sole proprietorship in 2003. I had been editor of a number of national Better Homes and Gardens-brand “how-to” newsstand magazines, and I continued to provide freelance writing, editing, and editorial project-management services to that sector, while also pursuing a graduate degree in architectural studies. My architecture thesis involved something you might call cultural-terrain analysis. Emplacing an object of public art as grit in the community oyster, to see what develops.

In 2008, my family and I started preparing for a deployment to Afghanistan. I was an Iowa National Guard citizen-soldier with one previous overseas deployment. Preparing for war, my daytime Army job involved internal communications and organizational lessons-learned. It wasn't public affairs—although I often worked alongside the Public Affairs officer and NCO—but the brigade commander kept asking us all for ideas on best-practices and -policies regarding soldiers' off-duty blogs and social media. The Internet was the Wild West back then. Sometimes, I didn't know what to tell him.

There weren't any training manuals, so I started my own off-duty blog under the pseudonym “Charlie Sherpa.” The exercise was equal parts “learn by doing” and “ask forgiveness, not permission.” People still call me “Sherpa,” particularly in veteran circles. It helps people find my published work. It

also helps differentiate between my efforts as a veteran-activist, and as a for-hire writing and editing professional.

I ended up not deploying to Afghanistan. Got the word about 10 days before Mobilization-day. I retired instead. However, I eventually went to Afghanistan on my own, embedding as civilian media with my former unit. That story became an essay, and has even been re-told in comic book form (*True War Stories*, Z2 Comics).

In 2015, I registered Middle West Press as a limited liability corporation in the State of Iowa, and expanded business operations as an independent book publisher of journalism, non-fiction, and poetry. Poet Lisa Stice joined us as an associate editor in 2023. In the past, we've also had the pleasure of working with guest editors such as the *Line of Advance* journal's Christopher Lyke, and Steve Leonard—the creator of the military-themed DoctrineMan!! cartoon.

We call ourselves a “micro-press”—we publish only one to four titles annually, and our projects can be driven as much by intellectual curiosity and artistic exploration as by potential profit. Our bottom line: We like to complicate and enrich readers' insights into the people, places, and history of the American Midwest—and the U.S. military.

What's the connection between “military” and “midwest”? Both are often overlooked by ivory tower academics, big city publishers, and others who seem to have their own pre-conceptions about what being a Midwesterner or veteran must mean. The truth is, not all veterans are “heroes.” Neither are all veterans “broken.” Reality is more center-mass than those tropes; reality is equal parts sublime, mundane, and human. To paraphrase Walt Whitman: We contain multitudes.

Veterancy shouldn't be flyover country—a place viewed from 40,000 feet every November 11. War poets—a term that can include veterans and mil-fam and anyone else willing to do the

work—can short-circuit expected narratives with amazing, everyday insights into hurt and loss and growth and reconciliation. I've often said that every U.S. citizen has a connection with the military, even if only as a voter and taxpayer. The fight for hearts and minds and empathy for what it means to go to war is out here. In the hinterlands. In the boonies.

Middle West Press published our first book of poetry for the same reason Sherpa started a blog: Learn by doing. Once we learn how to something—and to do it well—we try to teach others. The Army would call it “lessons-learned integration.” In 2022, I tried to capture the philosophy in a short prose-poetry-memoir, *Twelve O'Clock Haiku*.

(Another lessons-learned tie-in: After the unit returned from Afghanistan, Middle West Press also worked with my former brigade public affairs colleagues, compiling and publishing a 668-page organizational history titled *Reporting for Duty: U.S. Citizen-Soldier Journalism from the Afghan Surge, 2010-2011*.)

Since 2015, we've serendipitously developed an expertise in curating and promoting “21st century war poetry.” Many of these soldier-poets—but not all—are rooted in the American Middle West. Each collection we publish is intended to disrupt stereotypes of what it means to be an American veteran, or to be a member of a military family. After all, we're not all Navy SEALs and American Snipers. Some of us are F-16 pilots. Or Navy Corpsmen. Or Coast Guard mustangs. Or Army logistics soldiers.

We use poetry to build bridges of mutual empathy and understanding, between “military” and “civilian” audiences. Every poem is a conversation.

Our collections usually comprise more than 50 poems. In considering manuscripts, we look for unique voices, life-

experiences, and perspectives. We also like to see lots of chewy intersections and contradictions within a poet's veteran-identity. People are not just uniforms, after all—they are parents, spouses, hikers, professors, nurses, etc.

From a business standpoint, poetry books provide low-stakes opportunities for experimentation. We are a traditional-model publisher; in other words, we pay our authors—they never pay us. We don't fund our operations via submissions-fees or "contests." We don't ask our authors to pimp their friends and families for pre-sales. And, when we publish, we use Print-on-Demand (POD) technology—wherever it is sold in the world, a copy of a book is printed only when it is purchased. That way, no one ends up with 500 extra copies sitting in a garage or basement.

Our starting goal with poetry books is to sell more than 100 copies. Because we run on bootstrap-budgets, that covers most everything but editorial labor. Our poetry books are priced to be accessible: Usually about \$12 recommended cover price.

With our first books, we ended up doing more than break-even, and we've been able to replicate those successes a number of times over. By the end of 2023, we'll have published 13 individual poetry collections, as well as anthologies of military-themed prose, poetry, and non-fiction.

Our poetry books are eye-catching, award-winning, and best-selling. One forthcoming collection is by a U.S. Navy Reserve intelligence officer, who also teaches American literature. One is by a U.S. Army veteran of Iraq, who now also writes gritty (and funny) crime fiction [Liam Corley, who is mentioned above by Tracy Crow]. A third is an Army veteran of Afghanistan—she's a divorced single-parent who recently gender-transitioned, after years of sobriety and therapy.

Our books can be found on the shelves of such places as the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, the Dean F. Echenberg War

Poetry Collection at the University of Texas-Austin, and even the Library of Congress.

We're particularly excited about an anthology forthcoming this November, *The Things We Carry Still: Poems & Micro-Stories about Military Gear*. Showcasing the work of approximately 60 war writers, the book will also feature a set of 10 discussion topics and writing prompts inspired by the book's content. The foreword is written by Vicki Hudson, a former U.S. Army officer who advocated dismantling "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policies.

We've got some crazy things planned for 2024 and beyond. For example, Middle West Press recently opened a call for a "Giant Robot Poems" anthology that will engage themes related to culture, war, and technology. Everything from Predator Drones to R2D2. We're also conceptualizing a potential first call for an anthology of short war fiction; it would likely be organized around a particular geographic or genre theme.

I continue to volunteer as poetry editor for the national non-profit Military Experience & the Arts' literary journal *As You Were*—a post I've held since about 2015. Editor-in-Chief David Ervin and other editors work hard to make that publication a welcoming, inclusive space. It's a great market for war-writers who are just starting to explore their stories on the page. They love working with established writers, too.

Middle West Press also underwrites a community of practice called The Aiming Circle (www.aimingcircle.com), a resource for writers who regularly engage military themes and topics. Our coverage helps writers identify potential book publishers, literary journals, academic publications, and other markets for their work. The Wrath-Bearing Tree is one of our most-recommended literary markets.

So that's a quick history of Middle West Press: Grit in the oyster. Learn by doing. Then teach others. Along the way,

build bridges and disrupt stereotypes.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

Middle West Press: <http://www.middlewestpress.com/>

MilSpeak Foundation: <https://milspeakfoundation.org/>

Full disclosure: I have an essay in the MilSpeak anthology *Beyond The Limits of Their Longing* and another under consideration for an upcoming Middle West anthology.