“We Were There”

VETERANS WRITING
AT YOUR LIBRARY
The book that started it all....
Where the seed came from...

From an article in American Libraries Magazine: Helping Warriors Unleash the Power of the Pen, I planned to host a writing group for Veterans. I met with Liz Petry, a local author, to model our writing group on the Veteran’s Writing workshop written about in the article. Liz had taught college English and her husband is the commander of the Veterans of the Vietnam War in Middletown.

Christy Billings and Liz Petry

Partners in crime for the Russell Library Veterans Writing Group:

“We Were There.”
Small but enthusiastic group at the beginning
Theme: Excerpts from *Unbroken*
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- Week one writing prompt
  “A Person You Admire.”

- Week two writing prompt
  “Memorable Event or Place”

- Week three writing prompt
  “Cultural Differences Encountered.”

We encouraged all Veterans, either active or retired to come and write their experiences for their own benefit or to share with family and friends.
More members came...
We Were There: Russell Library’s Veteran’s Writing Group

Branches of service represented:
Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, and Air Force.
Conflicts: WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm
Jerry’s pictures

• Jerry brought his photo album. He carried a ‘brownie camera’ in Vietnam in one of his water canteens.
So you think you want to start a writing group?

Considerations:

• Theme
• Connections/Contacts: Phil Cacciola (previous Commander) and Larry Riley, Current Commander of the American Legion Milardo-Wilcox Post 75
• Quiet Meeting Space: Meeting Rm 2
• Consistent Meeting times that don’t conflict with other established Veteran’s Programs
• Materials: pads, pens, staplers, dictionary, thesaurus
• Teaching skills/organization skills
Now what!

• After three weeks the guys wanted to keep writing.

• Met with our Director Art Meyers, and began to secure funding for six more weeks of writing. The Friends of Russell Library became our new sponsor.

• Liz did an overview of English 101

• Applying writing skills to their personal stories

• WRITE THE PROMPTS DOWN!!
More “Now what.”

• Write naturally (Handwritten) It’s a FIRST Draft!
• Things to think about: Audience, purpose
• Don’t feel you need to begin at the beginning!
• Short “writing work-outs.”
• Newspaper pictures, photographs or articles
• Costs: Pens, paper, small stipend for Liz’s time.
The **How** of our weekly meetings:

**Meeting Format**

- Liz and I have an agenda of discussion items, such as events the members are attending, Podcasts, brief video clips, articles, book excerpts. and of course a prompt. Copies of articles are provided to each participant, along with the weekly prompt.
- Previous weeks writing handed back with a short critique.
- The members read aloud from their writing
- We discuss and add thoughts.
- New prompt and 30 minutes of writing.
- 10 minute reminder given to wrap it up
- Finish with any final thoughts and events that people will be attending.
Funding issues

• The Friends of Russell Library continued to be our sponsor for several years.
• New library leadership…questioned the validity of the group, and attempted to shut it down.
• Meetings were changed so we didn’t meet Jan/Feb or June/July/August to adjust to reduced funding.
• Applied for Community Foundation of Middlesex County Grant to publish the collected works through Book Baby.
• Through a serendipitous series of events, have secured a publishing contract with En Route publishing!
In their own words:

Bob F. Marine Core, Peleliu Island South Pacific, WWII
__Semper Fi, Once a Marine, Always a Marine.__

“The writing group here at Russell Library has been very valuable to me. The main reason is the personal stories of the veterans in service to their country should never be lost.”
In their own words:

Phil: Coast Guard, Cuba, Vietnam era

“Hearing the men tell their stories about their various service related activities made this group priceless.”
In their own words:
Harvey: Air Force, Vietnam,

“I joined this group about a year after it was formed. Liz Petry our moderator knew that I enjoyed writing and knew of my military experiences, and encouraged me to participate. While I have resisted most offers to join a veteran’s organization, I embraced this group because it consisted of other Veterans who enjoyed writing and telling their stories about their time in service. I find that we share a camaraderie even though we served in different branches, at different times and even different eras. Our common denominator is that we all spent time in the armed forces and away from our homes and loved ones. This is the bond that ties us together. We have formed a family.

• By Harvey Goldstein, Air Force the 6994th Security Squadron
Their own words: Gene Sullivan:

‘We were there,’ the best things about this group:
Most salient about this group has been the choice to- and the necessity to put down on paper, the memories and chronologies of a portion of my life lived long ago.

The camaraderie of my fellow veterans and their experiences shared in an atmosphere of casual conversation is unmatched. I applaud too the direction, encouragement, and mentoring provided by our discussion leaders, Chris and Liz.

By Eugene Sullivan Commandant Middlesex County Detachment Marine Corps League
In their own words:
Jim: Army, Vietnam

The veterans in our community are plentiful, from WWII to the current conflicts. Several have gathered together and meet once a week to discuss and more importantly write about their experiences in the military.

These stories tell the tales of individuals and how they coped with their experiences.

For some it is a relief, a release of emotions held inside for years. These stories are non-fiction and should be shared with current and future generations. They are part of American History and need to be presented as a learning tool.”
In their own words: Aaron, US Navy

Sounds but no fury …

The lows between the highs were becoming interminable … Or not. It’s a forty-five year old memory, so who knows. Truth becomes approximate this long after the expiration date. I do remember that there were times when there was just nothing going on. No missions, no drills, no emergencies of any kind, no refueling or replenishments, no mail. They didn't make us paint or clean or inspect us or search us for drugs or … anything.

We just stood by and waited. War is monotonous.
Jenn: First Lieutenant in the Army Nurse Corps in Vietnam

“For me, that year in Vietnam is full of intense memories and I so appreciate the welcome I received into the Veteran’s Writing Group at the Russell Library, a place in which to share those memories through my poems.

I was ignorant to the politics of the time, but idealistic about providing medical care to the troops serving our country.

I can’t help but cling to this line from one of my poems: ‘my being before you, no less vulnerable, just as bereft. Between us, I knew nothing. All of us struggled to make sense of our time there.’”
In their own words:
Jerry Augustine: Army, Vietnam, 196th Light Infantry Brigade:
“I have so many stories to tell. I almost lost my life six times….I feel I had a guardian angel and got to come home. There’s a reason for me to be here because now I help out Veterans.”
In their own words:

“We are old and older but seem to act as one, What I feel is the most valuable about this group is we have become a unit, a squad, a platoon and act as a unit should. We strive to reach the objective to complete the mission. All for one.”
What we learned:

• Ask new members to fill out an index card with contact info including branch of service.

• A consistent schedule is best!

• Have a stapler, notepads, paper clips, pens. (and dictionary, thesaurus if possible.)

• Write prompts out

• BE FLEXABLE! Be ready to adjust the prompts based on the evening and what your members may have experienced during the week!
PUBLISHER!

En Route Publishing

• Serendipitous meeting between Jerry and Sister Mary who was studying English at the Holy Apostles Seminary in Cromwell.

• Sisters visited the group and then invited the guys to come to Holy Apostles.

• Introduced us to Doctor Mafood who was interested in a sample of the men’s writing.

• Met again and discussed the publishing contract, and our new director, Ramona Burkey signed on the dotted line.
Thursday evenings at Russell Library, in Middletown, CT
Reaching Veterans at Your Library