

# Read, Think, Write, and **PUBLISH**

By Admiral Jim Stavridis, U.S. Navy

**A senior commander and veteran writer encourages  
Sea Service professionals to fearlessly air their  
ideas in print and on the Internet.**

**B**enjamin Franklin once said, “Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.” But I would say, “Do both!” Live well, write about it, and write it well. Life in today’s military certainly takes care of the “worth writing” part of Franklin’s advice by providing us a broad, rich array of *worthy* experiences and ideas, worthy of living, but also worthy of reading, documenting, discussing, and—above all—publishing.

Much as the sea has been the inspiration for many writers—poets, novelists, journalists, even scientists—our military profession itself is a sea of inspiration. It is ever-changing, nearly boundless, often Hollywood-style exciting, and begs to be interpreted, presented, and debated. Indeed, we already have a well-established literary heritage, from purist strategy and tactics to fiction and even science fiction, but each of us has a role to play in continuing and improving on this heritage.

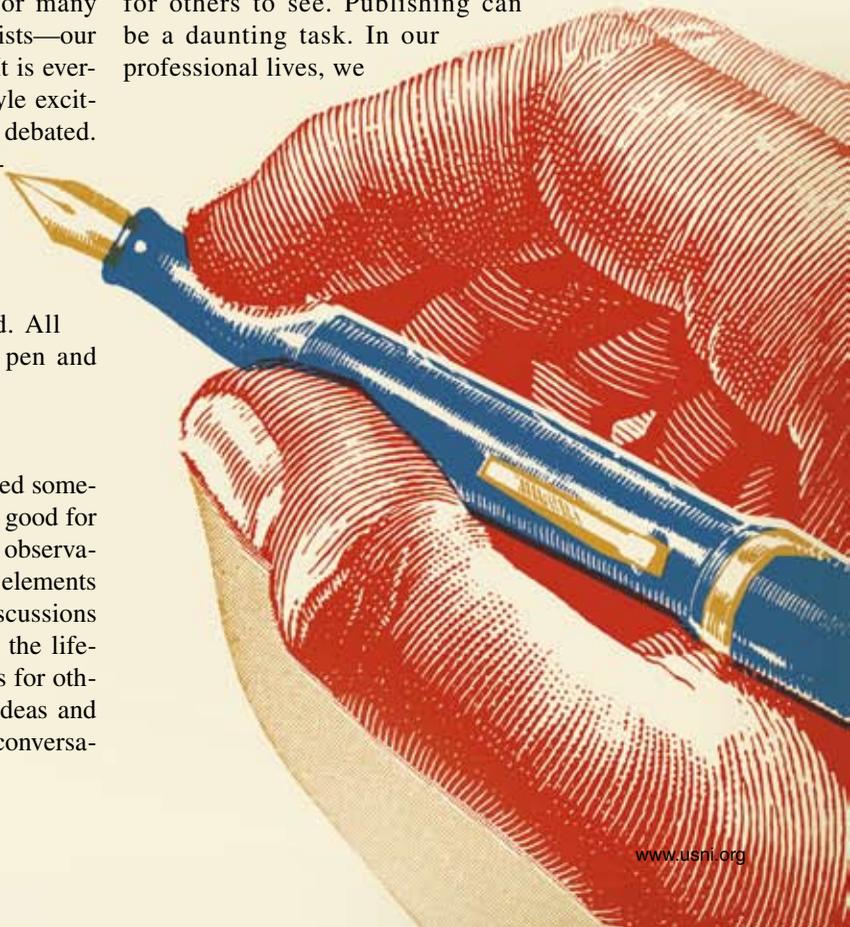
And it has never been easier to get started. All you need are some ideas you care about and pen and paper . . . or more likely, just a keyboard.

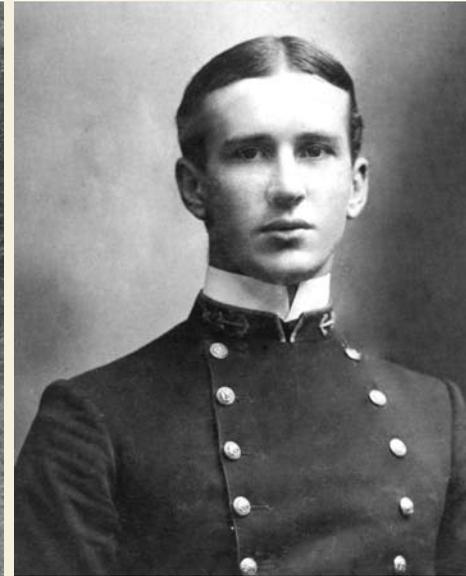
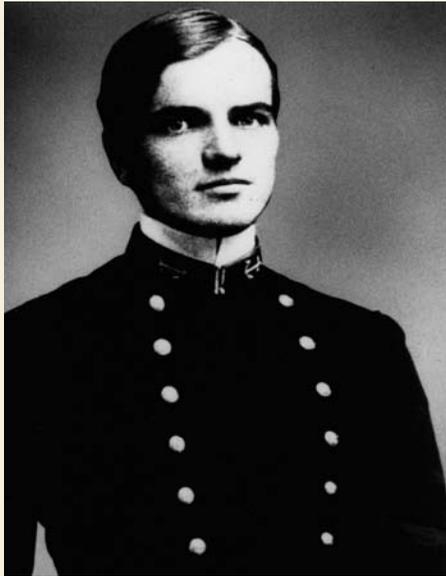
## **Something Worth Writing**

All of us who have served have observed or lived something worth writing *and* something that would be good for others to read. We often express these ideas and observations in wardroom discussions, which are critical elements of personal and unit development. But these discussions usually make local impact only and stay within the life-lines of the ship or unit. Publishing your thoughts for others to see, however, extends the reach of your ideas and sparks a larger discussion, a larger professional conversa-

tion. In the case of widely-read journals—whether service specific like *Proceedings* or the *Marine Corps Gazette*, or broader-reaching joint or international publications like *Foreign Affairs* or the *Harvard Business Review*—your ideas can influence a great many and inspire conversations in numerous wardrooms or even academic centers, boardrooms, and cafés.

But here is the catch: your ideas will not go anywhere unless you have the courage to “hang them out there” for others to see. Publishing can be a daunting task. In our professional lives, we





**IN DISTINGUISHED COMPANY** Young officers such as (left to right) William F. Halsey, Chester Nimitz, and Ernest J. King all published in *Proceedings* without negative repercussions to their careers. The author urges today's junior leaders to follow their example.

can rationalize and mitigate the risks of holding station alongside an oiler in heavy seas or landing our aircraft on a pitching carrier deck; but for many, the thought of having our ideas read by others pegs the risk meter as unacceptable. Once our thoughts are out there, we feel we have lost control.

Let's face it, sometimes mentors even advise people against publishing, because it is perceived as a "career risk." Don't be afraid—have the moral courage to vet your ideas responsibly and sensibly. In virtually every case of which I am aware, even the most controversial articles (and I've written my share) are respected as attempts to contribute and respected as such.

The key to publishing and mitigating any risk is twofold: finding the appropriate venue and writing as best you can with complete honesty for that audience. Finding a venue is getting easier all the time. There are many print journals, for example, that would eagerly publish your ideas, stories, and articles, especially professional military journals. You don't have to be the CNO or a combatant commander to get them published, although one day you might find yourself in those shoes. After all, just look at three young officers who published in *Proceedings* over the years, names you might recognize: Lieutenants William F. Halsey, Chester Nimitz, and Ernest J. King. What ever happened to those guys?

In fact, *Proceedings*, or any professional journal, would become irrelevant without the youth of the force publishing ideas and taking interest in the greater professional conversation. If you look at the more exciting, thought-provoking, or innovative articles printed today, you more than likely will find young minds behind them—lieutenants, lieutenant commanders, and commanders. And the best ideas often come from unlikely sources and certainly are not the sole dominion of the "brain" or "genius" of the unit.

Options for publishing and testing our ideas are also ever-expanding. The Internet and electronic publications afford us ample opportunity to match our ideas against those of others. Blogs and Internet forums are great arenas for testing the waters, sharpening arguments, and crystallizing thoughts. Perhaps these forums even reduce the perceived risk level of publishing, lowering the "whole Navy will read this" anxiety factor.

To a certain extent this is true, and electronic forums serve a great messaging purpose. But military professionals should be cautioned always to keep the conversation above board and to avoid anonymous posting while keeping classification and good judgment in the forefront of our minds. I'm sure we've all learned the lesson of the e-mail we wish we hadn't sent—the one that got forwarded well beyond the lifelines of the ship—and that returned to haunt us. So use all the media available, but do so within the bounds of command sense, policy, regulation, and especially classification.

### Something Worth Reading

Even though we have growing publishing opportunities, that does not mean writing well is getting any easier. As Nathaniel Hawthorne once observed, "Easy reading is damn hard writing." Writing is a skill that needs continuous honing through practice, study, and formal mentorship if possible. Much as physical fitness and technical proficiency require dedicated time and effort, so too does writing. In fact, writing is a key skill for all leaders, regardless of rank, and must be exercised, evaluated, and rewarded when done well.

Of course, we have to keep in mind that not all of our writing will be worth reading. All of us will create some losers—I sure have. Even the best writers have had their flops. The key is to keep writing and publishing

anyway. Much as a baseball player who bats .333 (only one in three successes) is having a great season, a writer can also have hits and misses and still be successful. Of course, through bouncing your ideas off your peers and through honest editing, you should be able to turn your thoughts into a well-written argument and better position it for success. Always show a draft article to a few trusted advisers for comments and criticisms before turning it loose like a fawn in the forest for the real world.

When writing a professional article, I think Mark Twain has the best advice. "The time to begin writing an article is when you have finished it to your satisfaction. By that time, you begin to clearly and logically perceive what it is you really want to say." Rewriting is essential. But, on the other hand, do not let the perfect article be the enemy of the very good one. The perfect article does not exist! Trying to make it so will only guarantee you never publish it. By all means re-write, edit, deliberate, think; but ultimately, launch your ideas and see what comes.

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**Dare to speak out and challenge assumptions and accepted wisdom.**

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Be prepared, however, to face criticism. Despite your best efforts to formulate an idea and write it well, there will be critics. But you should look at criticism as a strength of the system. It means people are reading your work, that they are thinking, and that the environment is set for overall professional development. Besides, your argument, if written well, might persuade, inform, or influence the audience just as you intended.

Taking a good idea beyond the article phase can also be rewarding and make a lasting contribution to our literary legacy. Often an article or series of articles can germinate and grow into a full-length book. And probably the best way to master your subject of interest is to research and write a book about it. In the naval service, we have many published authors whose works still influence new generations of sea-goers.

Of course, our culture has evolved over the years when it comes to writing. Alfred Thayer Mahan is a legend for his strategy classics, but after he wrote his defining opus *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, Mahan was admonished by a superior who said in a famously



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quoted fitness report, “It is not the business of a Naval officer to write books.” I disagree. Don’t feel you have to write a book, but on the other hand, don’t rule out the possibility that eventually you may want to do so. And don’t forget that Mahan ended up retiring as an admiral after all. No one remembers the officer who wrote the fitness report; but everyone knows Admiral Mahan, and the *Arleigh Burke* destroyer named for him proudly sails the seas today.

## The Marketplace of Ideas

In this rapidly globalizing 21st century, our nation and our military are out competing in a marketplace of ideas. We live in a 24/7 news cycle with near instant reporting and widespread dissemination of stories. It is a teeming, tumultuous, and exhausting marketplace. There has been a tremendous push for military professionals to understand, quantify, and assess our ability to compete in this arena. On all fronts, we must excel at strategic communication—the ability to get our message out to the right audience, at the right time, with the proper effect, and in all media.

Each of us has a clear obligation to contribute to this effort, to be a part of the conversation, to help our ideas compete. Our nation was founded on ideas that just could not be repressed—those of freedom and liberty. In 1776,

we launched these ideas into a world ruled by a different system. Our ideas faced stiff competition, and throughout the years we have even suffered wars to defend them—wars like today’s struggle against extremists who use terrorism as a weapon, often to suppress freedom of expression. Our second President, John Adams, once wrote that the best way to defend our ideas was through using our minds: “Let us tenderly and kindly cherish, therefore, the means of knowledge. Let us dare to read, think, speak, and write.”

So, dare to read and develop your understanding. Carve out the time to think and form new ideas. Dare to speak out and challenge assumptions and accepted wisdom if your view differs from them. Have the courage to write, publish, and be heard. Launch your ideas and be an integral part of the conversation.

Why? Because it makes our nation and our profession stronger. In the end, no one of us is as smart as all of us thinking together. ❄

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Admiral Stavridis is the commander of U.S. Southern Command. He began his Navy publishing life as *Salty Sam* at the Naval Academy in 1976, and has since published more than a hundred articles and four books on leadership, shiphandling, and watch-standing, including *Command at Sea* and, most recently, *Destroyer Captain*.

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