

Warrior scribe
Pararescueman unites military, civilian writers

By Sgt. David Bedard
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For Air National Guard Maj. Matthew Komatsu, the night of Sept. 14, 2012 was punctuated by chaos, terror and his dogged resolve to bring the fight to those who aimed to harm his comrades-in-arms.

Disguised in American military uniforms, 15 heavily armed Taliban infiltrated Camp Bastion – located in Helmand province, Afghanistan – and attacked the airfield.

Komatsu didn't play it safe by hunkering down. He grabbed his carbine, armor and night-vision goggles, rounded up a few other pararescuemen, and headed toward the din of battle.

After linking up with Royal Air Force airmen who were already engaging the Taliban, Komatsu ~~called in~~[worked to deconflict friendly positions with](#) Marine Corps AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters, ~~which then destroyed~~[ing](#) an insurgent strongpoint.

The Taliban attack would leave two U.S. Marines dead and numerous AV-8B Harrier ground-attack fighters destroyed. Of the Taliban, 14 were killed and one was captured.

It would take months for Komatsu to tell the story of that night's violence, his sense of loss, and the heroism of his team and allies. The words came to him in fragments – small episodes of movement and dialogue – before they would coalesce into a nearly 3,000-word story published by the New York Times.

“I felt like I finally gave myself permission to write about something – to fully pursue it,” Komatsu said of his Camp Bastion piece. “I had to deconstruct my own inhibitions in order to do so, but once I did it – once I wrote that story and got it published – I was hooked.”

Danger close

Today, Lieutenant Colonel Komatsu is the commander of the Alaska Air National Guard's 212th Rescue Squadron.

Recently, he hosted a two-day writing workshop – aptly called Danger Close: Alaska – in downtown Anchorage joining veterans and civilians with authors.

Marine Corps veterans Benjamin Busch and Elliot Ackerman joined Alaska author Sherry Simpson, hosting presentations and helping writers work the kinks out of their submitted manuscripts.

Active duty service members, retired troops, military family members, Vietnam veterans and college students huddled around tables and laboriously hashed through what did and didn't work with their literary outpourings.

Between sessions, Komatsu and the authors spoke of the joys and challenges of turning an idea into a published manuscript.

They also talked about the place risk and conflict have in writing.

“War is an unfortunate byproduct of human nature,” Komatsu explained. “It’s been around since before recorded history began, and it will be around for long after I’m gone from this earth. War and love are probably the two greatest impetuses for storytelling, and often they’re intertwined.”

Ackerman said conflict is a critical ingredient in a compelling story.

“Nowhere is that conflict more present than in those who have frequently been in war,” the author said. “Every civilization is built on the concept of ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ but war is the one time we have sanctioned violence, and we sort of throw that away in the name of preserving our civilization ... That presents an inherent conflict that is old as time itself.”

Komatsu’s journey of getting authors and writers, civilians and military, retired and active duty together to share and enhance the telling of their stories was a realization months, if not years, in the making.

Finding his story

Hoping to eventually train as a fighter pilot, Komatsu attended the Air Force Academy ~~at-in~~ Colorado Springs where he studied the humanities. It was during glider training when the cadet discovered he was prone to motion sickness. Any dreams of flashing across the sky at Mach 2 in an F-15 Eagle gave way to the reality of a disconcertingly queasy stomach at altitude.

Because the liberal arts curriculum – philosophy, music, film studies – was in addition to academy requirements such as aeronautical engineering, Komatsu would rack up 176 credit hours before commissioning in 1999.

Though initially assigned to the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, Komatsu said he garnered an interest in pararescue after learning about PJ operations in Mogadishu, Somalia.

“I read *Black Hawk Down*, and I was really intrigued by these guys that went down a fast rope in the middle of a firefight to try and save lives in a crashed helicopter,” Komatsu recalled. “I thought, ‘Wow, what an interesting job,’ but it wasn’t open to officers.”

Fortunately for the would-be pararescueman, the Air Force established the combat rescue officer career field in 2000.

After OSI assignments to Altus Air Force Base, Oklahoma, and then-Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, Komatsu successfully navigated the grueling, nearly two-year long CRO ‘pipeline’ training.

During his next assignment to the 563d Rescue Group at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona, the newly minted CRO deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan.

After returning stateside, Komatsu ~~became the deputy branch chief of personnel recovery~~took a staff assignment. Faced with the prospect of continued military moves, ~~likely additional~~ staff time and mounting professional military education

requirements, the Airman began to wonder if he and his wife, Jen, should follow a different path.

“We had arrived at the point where we needed to have some stability in our lives,” Komatsu said. “I wanted to do some more time at the tactical level, and there was going to be very little of that to come in active duty.”

The couple found the irre solution in an Active Guard Reserve assignment at the Alaska Air National Guard with the 212th Rescue Squadron, where Komatsu could continue his active service in a tactical billet.

Though the primary mission of the 212th RQS is federal and involves the recovery of flight crew isolated behind enemy lines, Komatsu said he enjoys the squadron's peacetime support of statewide rescue operations.

“The nice thing about us up here in Alaska is we're extremely mission-focused because of the alert mission that we have,” he said. “That allows us to focus on what's important. There's nothing like the possibility that even I as the commander can get pulled to fly a mission at a moment's notice.”

With his budding family falling into a rhythm of sorts, Komatsu could pursue his interest in writing through the Master of Fine Arts in creative writing program at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

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Literary bridges

For Komatsu's MFA practicum, he opted to organize and host a veterans' writing workshop. He was aware of such workshops taking place in the Lower 48, stemming from the need to tell veterans' stories and bridge the gap between military and civilians.

He said he knew from the beginning he wanted Busch – a formerretired Marine lieutenant colonel, published writer, actor and film director – to be a part of the project, and Busch agreed to come nearly a year and a half before the workshop.

Komatsu was able to book Ackerman – a former Marine captain – through Words After War, a veterans' writing and advocacy organization.

Simpson, his mentor at UAA and author of *Dominion of Bears*, agreed to bring a civilian and Alaska perspective to the project.

With funding from Words After War and Standing Together, a National Endowment for the Humanities initiative, Komatsu's vision became a reality.

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Though billed primarily as an opportunity for veterans to write from their experience, Komatsu said he was hopeful civilian writers would come to learn from and offer their experiences to troops in attendance.

“I wanted it to be a surprise for everybody,” he said. “I didn't want this to be an echo chamber. I wanted different perspectives.

“You put two people in the same room and make them listen to each other's stories – in that act, you are forcing them to

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comprehend each other,” Komatsu continued. “That’s what dialogue is meant to be.”

His plan succeeded. Civilians who had little or no exposure to the military mingled with active, retired and former troops, asking them questions about their triumphs and travails in places like Kandahar, Ramadi and Da Nang.

One civilian college student wowed Busch and the workgroup he led with her lyrical poetry. She asked questions in an effort to bolster her understanding of military and conflict, while other writers asked her how she could turn the description of a dark highway into an engaging exploration of the human condition.

“I saw things happen in workshop here that were absolutely the first thing on my mind when I envisioned how things were going to happen,” Komatsu said. “Discussions were happening, feedback was happening, so it’s incredibly satisfying.”

At the end of the workshop, after the writers headed for home, after all of the paper coffee cups had been thrown away, after red pens had bled all over paper, after friendships had been made and bridges had spanned former straits of division, Busch sat down with Komatsu.

The two warriors spoke of how ancient Greek soldiers told their stories to family and friends after returning home in an effort to process and to reintegrate. The Marine and the Airman shared a bond with one another and with the Greek warriors of old through the storytelling power of the pen.

Commented [CA04]: I’m being a stickler, but we had ceramic cups. I remember wondering who was responsible for washing them. But it’s a good representation in your sentence and I don’t want to disrupt the smooth conclusion by recommending you say napkins. ;)