

## Sample Experiential Essay

### Analytical Writing Under Fire: How 16 Years in the Army has Taught Me To Understand Literature

Although it may come as a shock to hear that a Platoon Sergeant in the Infantry would learn the critical thinking, reading, and writing skills that students learn in the course, Writing about Literature, I realize that during my 16-year Army career, I have met many of the course objectives through the study and application of the Army Regulations and Field Manuals, as well as in my own use of literature in the supervision of my platoon. In this essay, I will show how the experience I have gained over the last 16 years I have spent in the Army has taught me to understand, appreciate, critically analyze, discuss, and apply what I have learned to both Army Regulations and Field Manuals, and why I should receive credit for the course, Writing about Literature. In particular, I will demonstrate the importance of understanding the cultural and historical context of original Army Regulations is vital to the critical analysis and application of modern regulations. I will also show how the guidance in Army publications is not black and white, and that I have to analyze the language of the text in order to fully understand the intent of the publications. Finally, I will demonstrate that in order to write effective policy memorandums and to verbally clarify guidance, I have to use analytical writing skills and literary devices that are not only in keeping with the military writing style, but are occasionally completely contrary to the military style.

Understanding the significance of cultural and historical context of literature is as important for students of English 104 as it is with Infantrymen in the Army. I will start with a short introduction to some of America's greatest literature; the Army Regulation. In order to appreciate and understand the concepts and theories behind military publications, you must understand the cultural and historical context in which these publications were originally written. While America was still a colony and under British rule, the only armed forces were British Soldiers. "From the 'shot heard around the world,' on 19 April 1775, until Valley Forge in 1778, Revolutionary forces were little more than a group of civilians fighting Indian-style against well-trained, highly disciplined British Redcoats." (U.S. Army Infantry School, 2003) After the Boston Tea Party, when our forefathers decided there was a need to break away and form our own Republic, we needed a standing Army. A full-time, dedicated armed force was not a common concept; at the time most Nations used levied armies that were gathered for a specific purpose, held together by fear, and disbanded immediately after the "war." The Continental Congress decided we would need a permanent armed force, and gave General George Washington the authority to raise such men and equipment as needed to fight the British. America's first General did well, but quickly realized there was a need for greater expertise. He also called on a Prussian officer, Baron

Friedrich Von Steuben to write our Nation's first military Field Manual, the 1779 "The Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States." This manual included such things as how to cook for troops, what formations troops should use in battle, proper field hygiene and various other "field craft." This book was used by the officers, who were educated land-holders, and was in use for the next 85 years. (U.S. Army Infantry School, 2003) Many of the drill commands, theories and concepts from this manual are still in use today, which is why you must understand the historical setting in which it was written.

Further, it is not until you understand the background and the history behind our current manual for Drill and Ceremony that you can truly understand both the gravity and the importance of our actions, from the simple morning formations where we stand in the rectangular formation, to how we march, and up to our highly disciplined and meaningful funeral ceremonies. I am intimately familiar with both our history and our current regulations and this allows me to ensure that my actions, and the actions of my subordinates, are in keeping with the military traditions that ensure our Nation's military continues to be a professional organization.

Understanding cultural/historical significance is not the only connection between understanding and applying Army manuals and the course goals for Writing About Literature. Guidance in Army publications is not black and white. Army Regulations and Field Manuals, at first glance, are dry publications with a logical and straightforward writing style, some might consider boring. However, when we apply critical reading and thinking strategies to these publications, a wealth of fascinating and engaging information emerges, information that is needed in order to properly apply the fundamental concepts introduced in these publications. Army Regulations are orders, transmitted in writing, which explain the intent of the Army's senior leadership. It is the responsibility of each Soldier, from new Private to seasoned General, to understand and comply with these regulations. In order to understand and comply with these regulations though, Soldiers must closely read many publications to enhance their ability to understand, appreciate and discuss Army regulations and Field Manuals. They must also carefully and completely analyze the content and style of the writing, and compare and contrast the message by matching it with your reality. While leaders stand ready at all levels to assist Soldiers in complying with the regulations, it remains the individual's responsibility to familiarize himself with the publications that pertain to his job, and further to critically analyze the intent contained in the individual publications.

An ideal example of this is Army Regulation 600-20, Army Command Policy, which is the cornerstone regulation for the United States Army. This regulation is part of the laws of the Army, and many of the orders in it are punitive in nature.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in order to avoid punishment, adhering to regulations is extremely important. Regulation 600-20 proscribes the policy and responsibility of command, which includes well-being of the force, military and personal discipline and conduct, the Army Equal Opportunity Program, Prevention of Sexual Harassment, and the Army Sexual Assault

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<sup>1</sup> "Punitive in nature" means that failure to follow those orders will result in punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). There are two kinds of punishment in the Army: the familiar Court-Martial, where the proceedings are very similar to a civilian court, and the less familiar "Non-Judicial punishment," where a Commander can impose a lesser amount of punishment without trial, and in many cases, without a formal defense.

Prevention and Response Program (Secretary of the Army, 2008). The following excerpt from this manual creates the theoretical base for all leader actions:

Professionally competent leaders will develop respect for their authority by...[p]roperly training their Soldiers and ensuring that both Soldiers and equipment are in the proper state of readiness at all times....Leaders at all levels [will] promote the individual readiness of their Soldiers by developing competence and confidence in their subordinates....A leadership climate in which all Soldiers are treated with fairness, justice, and equity will be crucial to development of this confidence within Soldiers. (Secretary of the Army, 2008)

The preceding excerpt should be read and re-read by all Soldiers, not just leaders. Not only is the author the Secretary of the Army and the Army's highest-ranking individual, but his lawful orders carry the weight of the entire Uniform Code of Military Justice. One reason you must critically analyze military publications is that since Soldiers are an eclectic bunch with very different job skills, backgrounds, work climates and tasks, the Regulations in general, and the Army Command Policy in particular, cannot afford to be overly specific. When orders that affect the entire Army are given, they must allow subordinate commanders some leeway in both application and interpretation, or you end up with a climate that does not take its individual into account. It is up to us as leaders to read and understand the intent of the regulation, and while we must always abide by the letter of the law, we must also often read in to the regulations to understand the theory behind them. As an example, AR 600-20, paragraph 1-5, 4, (a) requires Commanders (and leaders at all levels) to ensure their Soldier's readiness through training and counseling. The wording in the original sentence does not include "(and leaders at all levels)," but rather uses only the word "Commanders." To understand this literary device, you must also be familiar with General Schofield's "Definition of Leadership," which tells us that "The spirit of the unit springs from a corresponding spirit in the breast of the Commander." When we realize the use of the word "Commander" is modified by the popular military definition of Leadership, we also understand that the word "Commander" often refers to all leaders in a unit. Further, this sentence also tells us that it is training and counseling that will truly develop Soldiers to become better professionals and better develop their human potential. This analysis is pivotal to a complete understanding of the intent behind paragraph 4 of AR 600-20. However, this analysis cannot be taught in a classroom environment. It is only through experience and close reading of the message that you can arrive at an effective and thorough analysis.

The similarities between what I learned as Platoon Sergeant and the concepts taught in the course Writing About Literature go beyond critical thinking, reading, and analysis, though, since both include analytical writing. One of the ways Army leaders demonstrate their understanding of Army Regulations and Field Manuals is by writing effective Non-Commissioned Officer Evaluations Reports (NCOERs), so it is crucial that the rater have an intimate understanding not only of AR 600-20 (the regulation discussed in the above example), but also of all applicable Field Manuals and Army Regulations that affect the rated Soldier's current and future jobs. The NCOERs are the pinnacle of our annual counseling, and absolutely must be worded in a manner that will allow a reviewer to understand the rated NCOs actions and abilities. There are approximately 15 publications that immediately impact an Infantry Squad Leader's daily performance, and each of them is highly detailed and involves a good understanding of the theoretical "art" of a professional Infantryman. Each publication must be taken into consideration when writing the NCOER. It is important not only to use the doctrinal phrases from

these publications, but also to ensure the NCOER is written in a manner that makes the analysis of these documents and the evaluation of the Soldier easy to understand.

Over the last 14 years I have gained a much greater and more in-depth knowledge of how to effectively apply my analysis of military publications in writing. Almost 13 years ago, I wrote my first NCOER as a Sergeant for a Corporal Team Leader who worked for me, and I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. While I read the appropriate regulation on evaluation reporting, AR 623-3, the knowledge was not useful because I had no experience to base it on. I did, however, know to ask my senior NCOs for help. They “helped” me by letting me write the NCOER on my own and then using a red pen to “correct” my errors. As an example, the following bullet is what we call “fluff,” meaning it has no real quantifiable meaning: “o quality leader who can train and integrate new Soldiers and teach Army Standards.” The “o” starts a bullet in an NCOER. A “bullet” is the concept that the rater is trying to communicate to the reader; it is up to two lines and must be past tense as it discusses what the NCO did over the last year. AR 623-3 states in paragraph 3, Section IV, “Rating officials may consider including in their comments the degree of professionalism demonstrated by the rated Soldier in his or her particular area of expertise.” I interpret this statement to mean that in order to properly comment on the “degree of professionalism demonstrated by” my subordinate, a much stronger bullet would be quantifiable and discuss specifics regarding Infantry-centric actions: “o integrated and trained two new Soldiers to a high standard of excellence; both new Soldiers qualified expert on their assigned weapon, one Soldier attended and won a Soldier of the Month board.” The first bullet has no substance, but is truthful. The second bullet is truthful as well (in this scenario) but explains clearly how the rated NCO excelled in his particular area of expertise; leading and training Soldiers. This example illustrates my ability to write effective NCOERs by applying the theoretical knowledge and in-depth analysis of publications like AR 600-20 and AR 623-3.

During the 16 years I have been in the Army, I have also developed the ability to interpret Regulations and Manuals, as well as current professional publications in order to write evaluations accurately and ensure my subordinates’ actions are properly documented. In keeping with my clear understanding of AR 600-20, paragraph 4, I also routinely counsel my subordinates, both verbally and in writing. The written portion of this counseling serves as a record of their actions and must be worded in accordance with applicable publications. As an example, if I have a Soldier whose performance is substandard, I reference TRADOC Pamphlet 600-4, The Soldier’s Handbook, The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), and any applicable previous counseling. Since counseling is often about explaining actions and consequences, it is important that I make clear my understanding both of the intent of the regulations and how to apply those regulations to everyday life. To further illustrate this point, if a Soldier is routinely late to work, TRADOC Pamphlet 600-4, chapter 2, paragraph 2-6, “Army Values,” has this to say about Loyalty: “You show your loyalty to your unit by doing your share.” The same paragraph also states that “A loyal individual... [p]uts obligations in correct order: the Constitution, the Army, the unit, and finally, self.” Routinely showing up to our morning formation late clearly demonstrates that a Soldier is not prepared to do his share and has not put the unit or the Army before himself. Failing to demonstrate the Army Value of Loyalty is not an offense under the UCMJ. However, Article 86 (Absent Without Leave) of the UCMJ, clearly indicates that failing to be at the appointed place of duty is punishable as a Court-Martial may direct. Now, applying critical thinking to this Article tells us that no Commander is going to convene a Court-Martial simply because a Soldier is routinely late to

work. However, it is imperative that the Soldier fully understands the potential consequences of his actions. Without my ability to clearly explain how a Soldier's actions are affected by the regulations, my subordinates will be unable to successfully orient their actions and careers to align with the expectations of a large organization. In addition to NCOERs, another form of analytical writing that is part of Platoon Sergeant's job is writing policy letters. When I write policy letters for my Commander, I interpret applicable regulations, the UCMJ, and other related policy letters. In the policy letter for Forward Operating Base (FOB) Bullard, I first researched what AR 670-1 (Wear and Appearance of the Army Uniform) had to say about uniforms. I then researched the applicable All Army Activities (ALARACT) messages, referenced policy letters published by higher headquarters, and analyzed those documents for content, theme, and applicability to our remote FOB. Theme was uniquely important, as uniform standards are often tailored to both mission and location. If the theme of our higher headquarters was that uniformity took precedence over practicality, then my Commander would have to follow suit. If, as the case happened to be, the theme was that uniformity had a high import, but that due to unique circumstances, Ground Commanders<sup>2</sup> had the leeway to adjust gear and uniforms accordingly, then I could write a policy letter for my Commander that applied common sense in conjunction with Army Standards. As I wrote the policy letter, I applied critical thinking and writing skills to ensure I maintained the intent of the supporting publications, using the same literary style that defines Army writing. When the Commander approved the policy letter, it clearly explained the uniform standards to the Soldiers in my Company.

To demonstrate the sort of analysis, close reading, interpretation, and experience that is necessary in order to write an effective policy memorandum, I include the following lighthearted example of how I interpreted regulations to write a policy letter restricting from soldiers from smoking while walking. Paragraph 1, e. of the FOB Bullard Uniform Policy states "Soldiers will not smoke or drink while walking on the FOB." This order cannot be found in any regulation. However, when we read FM 3-21.5, paragraph 4-5 (b), "Except for Route Step March and At Ease March, all marching movements are executed while marching at Attention."<sup>3</sup> (U.S. Army Infantry School, 2003) and combine that with the knowledge that Soldiers march everywhere we go, you can reasonably understand that Soldiers may not smoke or drink while marching, as this would detract from the professional image of a disciplined Soldier. Chapter 4 of FM 3-21.4 supports this interpretation by starting off with this historical quote; "Maintain discipline and caution above all things, and be on the alert to obey the word of command. It is both the noblest and the safest thing for a great army to be visibly animated by one spirit." Archidamus of Sparta: To the Lacaedaenwnian expeditionary force departing for Athens, 431 B.C. (U.S. Army Infantry School, 2003)

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<sup>2</sup> A "Ground Commander" is the senior Officer in any given circumstance. In the case of FOB Bullard, my Company Commander was the senior US Officer for over 80 kilometers, and was responsible for Battalion level operations within the Shah-Joy province. This is a distinct position, most Company Commanders operate directly under their Battalion Commander.

<sup>3</sup> The "Position of Attention" is the classic "chest back, eyes front, arms straight, chin up" position you think of when a Soldier is receiving correction from a superior. It is a demonstration of both knowledge, in that the Soldier knows the position and can demonstrate it flawlessly, and it is a demonstration of discipline, in that instead of showing an emotion or a reaction, the Soldier remains perfectly still and rigid.

By analyzing the theme of this paragraph and understanding that its authorial intent was that Soldiers are to present a disciplined and professional appearance at all times, I concluded that smoking or drinking while walking does not demonstrate the discipline and caution required of Soldiers. It would hardly be professional to walk in to a fire hydrant while one's head is tilted back drinking, and it is visually unappealing to watch a supposed professional casually smoking while walking.

I will further demonstrate that in order to write effective policy memorandums and to verbally clarify guidance, I have to use analytical writing skills and literary devices that are not only in keeping with the military writing style, but are occasionally completely contrary to the military style. While very few of the military publications intentionally use literary devices such as satire, humor or parody, it is vital that leaders use those tools appropriately when we are communicating to our seniors, peers, and subordinates. My point to this is that the Army writing style is blunt and direct, but that in order to explain and apply the concepts, you have to use a wide variety of literary devices, both in verbal instruction and in written communication. An example of using these devices would be from my time as a Drill Sergeant. I often employ a "teach, train, enforce" process to instruct new Soldiers, and as part of the teaching phase, I need to ensure I have the Soldiers' attention. Humor and parody often work well when instructing the Position of Attention. In part, to stand properly at attention, one must "allow the arms to hang naturally, with a slight bend in the elbow." (U.S. Army Infantry School, 2003). Many Soldiers will stand with an exaggerated bend in their elbows, causing the unnatural effect of looking like a chicken. I would gently use parody to explain to Soldiers that PVT Snuffy<sup>4</sup> looks like a chicken trying to fit in to our formation, and if he would allow his arms to hang naturally with a slight bend in the elbow, he would not find himself on the wrong side of the chow hall later that night. Further, while PVT Snuffy may think that his interpretation of what a "natural" bend looks like, it is a Drill Sergeant's responsibility to ensure that PVT Snuffy does not labor long under the impression that he is qualified to judge the Army's definition of "natural."

Another excellent literary instruction tool I have often used to great effect is introducing Soldiers to Robert Burns' poem, "To a Louse," and asking them to analyze the poem in light of their new careers. In "To a Louse," an upper-class girl is sitting in church, prettily dressed up with a bonnet and an impudent louse crawling on her hair. While there are so many meanings we can take from this well-written poem (from how we expect the lower class to be dirty, yet take exception to a common louse on a rich young girl, to the satire Burns uses to gently mock people who think they are better than others), I steer my Soldiers towards understanding the final paragraph, and the closing thought that sums up our self-awareness: "O, wad some Power the giftie gie us/To see ourself as others see us!/It wad frae monie a blunder free us/An' foolish notion:/What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,/And ev'n Devotion!" (Burns, 1786) When we begin to understand Burns' "plea to the giftie," we also begin to understand that we do not "see ourself as others see us," and that we require the expert assistance of quality leaders in order for us to bring our actions and appearances in line with the expectations of the military organization to which we now belong. To become an effective leader in the Army, I have successfully

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<sup>4</sup>"PVT Snuffy" is a fictional character used as a literary device by many Sergeants. Depending on the circumstances, PVT Snuffy symbolizes the Soldier who is hopelessly lost, incompetent, unmotivated, or has another problem that is causing a Sergeant mental anguish. The device is used to warn Soldiers against the dangers of certain actions, and can be an effective way of not singling out a specific Soldier.

used a wide variety of literature to express my points and to assist Soldiers in becoming better professionals.

As unusual as it might seem to use poetry to teach Soldiers, using poetic devices has a long history in Army literature. Poetry evokes strong images and contains ideas that are greater than the sum of the words in the poem. The Field Manual, "Drill and Ceremony" is an excellent example. Its instructions for the command "Stand at Ease," which Soldiers have to memorize has several poetic elements:

The command for this movement is Stand at, EASE. On the command of execution EASE, execute Parade Rest, but turn the head and eyes directly toward the person in charge of the formation. At Ease or Rest may be executed from this position.<sup>5</sup> (U.S. Army Infantry School, 2003)

flowing rhythm, the cadence of its prose, and the repetition of words all contribute to memorization. If I were to use the same device that indicates verbal stress as "Drill and Ceremony" to demonstrate its rhythm, I would write this above passage this way:

The COMmand for this MOVEment is Stand at EASE  
On the COMmand of exeCUtion EASE  
EXecute Parade Rest but  
TURN the HEAD and EYES Directly Toward the PERson  
IN CHARGE of the forMAtion  
At Ease or Rest may be executed from this position

Besides hundreds of repetitions where I came to understand that only perfect practice makes perfect, learning to speak in the rhythm that compliments the instructions is a memorization tool, and further helps when we recite the instructions, word for word, to our instructors, and later to our Trainees. There are dozens of commands, each with their own instructions, that require this memorization and attention to detail. I have no doubt that in the late 1700s, as the new officers in the Revolutionary Army were training their Soldiers to march on the field of battle, that the Company's senior Private would also memorize the instructions and commands, and he would then drill his fellow Soldiers at night time, hoping for a good performance on the practice field the next day. I believe that Baron Von Steubon wrote his orders in a way to ensure easy memorization, knowing the nature of Soldiers would demand they learn the instructions and commands in order to excel.

One final literary device that I'd like to point out here and that I do not believe the Baron intended is the highly ironic use of the word "Ease" in this command. Standing "At Ease" is an unnatural position that causes your shoulders and back to ache after a few minutes. "Parade Rest" is worse, there is absolutely nothing "restful" about "Parade Rest." I have always found it ironic that the Army has taken these two words and interpreted them to mean "Ache" and "Pain." The experience I have gained in closely reading and applying what I've read has further ensured my ability to communicate the intent of the regulations to my peers and subordinates. For example, in "Drill and Ceremony," Soldiers must realize that not every funeral detail will be alike and use the guidance appropriately, often in an

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<sup>5</sup> You may have noticed that the word "Ease" is in all capital letters at some points, and only capitalized at others. "Attention, Parade Rest, Stand at Ease, At Ease, and Rest" are all titles of Rest Positions from the Halt. When actually giving the commands, however, the last word is spoken with emphasis, and the word is capitalized to demonstrate the emphasis.

emotionally charged environment that cannot be controlled in a military manner. FM 3-21.3 gives broad guidance for these situations.

Since all situations or eventualities pertaining to drill and ceremonies cannot be foreseen, commanders may find it necessary to adjust the procedures to local conditions. However, with the view toward maintaining consistency throughout the Army, the procedures prescribed herein should be followed as closely as possible. (U.S. Army Infantry School, 2003)

This passage asks leaders to extrapolate from our knowledge of human behavior and arrive at a suitable course of action, and to ensure we maintain consistency throughout the Army. This consistency can only be achieved by leaders who have a broad base of knowledge and experience in conducting funeral details. We are all familiar with the three volleys and “Taps,” that signal the end of the funeral service. However, often times, finding a suitable location for the firing detail and the bugler is a challenge. When a funeral detail is held inside a building, a means to signal the detail to fire must be devised that is suitably respectful and effective. If a funeral detail is held in a small graveyard surrounded closely by trees, the bugler must be stationed where he will not be too loud, but at the same time, is not actually in the trees. Once we have arrived at a suitable course of actions, we, as leaders, must also ensure that the course we have chosen is communicated well to our subordinates and that they understand the intent clearly.

In conclusion, it is through experience with reading and interpreting Army literature in order to write evaluations, counsel, teach and lead that I have gained a great understanding of how to analyze, appreciate, discuss and apply my knowledge. Through critically reading Army Regulations and Field Manuals and understanding the literary devices, I have gained the ability to communicate effectively with my peers and subordinates. Despite the publications not being short stories, drama, or poetry, they nonetheless require a deep understanding of literary devices, as well as an understanding of the historical and cultural context in which they are written (Brandman University, 2011) in order to truly grasp the theory and concepts of each specific publication. Finally, the U.S. Army writes its Army Regulations and Field Manuals in such a way that without the critical analysis, close reading, and professional discussions taught in ENGU 104, it would be impossible to arrive at the proper conclusions necessary to provide guidance and development to subordinates.

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