

Time to Saddle Up...

Editor's Note: The author, Jon T. Clemens, retired in March after 18 years as managing editor of ARMOR.

The job of managing editor of *ARMOR* Magazine looked like an interesting prospect in 1983, when I drove over to the little house on Vine Grove Road for my interview. At that point, I had worked for newspapers for 16 years, had been managing editor of a magazine, had edited hundreds of stories, had written a weekly syndicated column on popular music, had published an underground newspaper, and had coached writers. I figured that the *ARMOR* job would be more of the same, and in any case, I wasn't committed to doing it for the rest of my life.

My interview with Colonel Steiner went well. When he asked for questions, I asked about the magazine's budget to pay writers for articles. He said there wasn't any. "They get a nice certificate and a couple of free copies, but that's it," he said. Then he showed me the drawer full of pending stories, more than 120 of them waiting for publication! This was my first big surprise, because at that point, I really had no idea what I had gotten myself into.

The magazine was almost 100 years old at the time, one of the oldest in America, yet they didn't pay their writers! The letters in each issue continued page after page, essentially a long, running dialogue about tactics and techniques, strategies and technologies, argued passionately. Soon after taking the job, I also discovered that while the copies that went out to units were free, there were ways to subscribe if you wanted your own copy. My next surprise was that there were more copies going out to paid



subscribers than were going to the addresses on the official mailing list. A lot of people obviously cared about this magazine I was inheriting. But I really had no idea the extent of it. As the weeks passed, I realized that I had stumbled into what any editor would consider a dream job, as the middleman in a love affair between writers, readers, and an institution with a history.

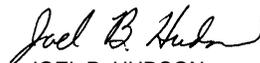
Ironies piled up. One of the smallest branches in the Army was sustaining a truly remarkable professional dialogue, and it wasn't like this was a new development. It had all begun in 1888 when cavalry officers on the frontier, separated from each other by at least a day's ride on horseback, used the medium of a journal to talk about their craft, to trade ideas, to argue the things that were important to them. Papers were submitted to the Cavalry Association's editorial board, and the good ones were published on a steam-driven press in a little town in Kansas. After I joined the staff, I discovered that you could read the results in the magazine's library,

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where all the past issues, bound in tattered buckram, were available.

I paged through the old books on my lunch hours, tracing the branch's progress from boots and saddles to tracks and turrets as the business of mobile warfare evolved. And after a while, it became obvious that while the tools of the trade might have changed, the purpose of the magazine had not.

What made this even more fascinating to a professional civilian like myself was the degree to which writers felt free to express unofficial opinions and dissents. This value is rare in any kind of hierarchal institution, and hardly expected in the armed services, which are hierarchal for a pretty good reason, this being a life and death business. In any case, there was dissent aplenty. And even more surprising was that it was tolerated in good will by a lot of guys with stars on their shoulders. They depended on a field grade military editor to make the decisions — no committees or editorial boards to knock off the sharp corners, no political correctness concerns — and this down-the-middle independence clearly had a lot to do with the strong loyalty of *ARMOR's* readers. As a former enlisted person, this did a lot to change my opinion of generals, too. It takes guts to listen to someone who disagrees with you, especially when you don't have to. This delicate balance, this editorial *laissez faire*, continued during my years at *ARMOR*, violated only twice that I remember. That has been another surprise.

Indeed, General Donn A. Starry noted this quality in his essay on the occasion of the magazine's 100th birthday in 1988:

"The great names of our branch have, almost without exception, been contributors; it has been their interest, concern, and willingness to contribute to the debate, to share their experience and knowledge with others, that have enabled our journal and our branch to survive, grow, and be the strength we are today."

When these great soldiers wrote for their journal, it was often not to agree, but to challenge. Lieutenant John J. Pershing's letter to the editor in 1889 took issue with the cavalry pistol in use

at the time. George Patton's frequent dissents covered everything from the employment of tanks with infantry to the shape of a saber blade. He contributed 25 articles during his career! This tradition continues today: see LTC Steve Eden's dissent on maneuver warfare in our last issue, or LTC Tim Reese's article in this one.

Another tradition has been the sharing of critical information, how-to articles that fill in the gaps between field manual optimism and on-the-ground reality... "I tried this and it didn't work, but then we tried this and it did"-type stories. Sometimes an author lays out the problem from the ground up: MAJ David Lemelin's "Crisis in Battle: The Conduct of the Assault," in January-February 1995 is a classic story of this type, powerfully-written, about the core task of this branch.

The magazine's pages have also been the launching pad for the discussion of issues well beyond our branch. MAJ Don Vandergriff's detailed dissection of the Army's up-or-out personnel system is an example. Perhaps too easy a target — the system seems a dull-minded, hideous waste of good people — Vandergriff extended his fight to the web, gathered allies, and most recently edited a collection of essays on the subject. Publication of this book led to briefings with high-level people who might actually have the power to change this atrocious system.

Another type of story parallels the civilian travelogue. These are the stories coming from the sharp edge, describing what it's like in Somalia, or Bosnia, or Haiti, advisories to those who come after. An unusual candidate in this category was CPT Doug Huber's humorous account of his tour in Bosnia and his battle against the Social Security Administration to get a check delivered to a Serbian widow — in peacekeeping today, these missions may come with the territory.

Each day, when we opened the mail, we would be surprised. These incoming stories were testament to the vibrancy of this branch and its traditions.

My instinct is that it will all continue without me. But it's been an honor to be involved. Drive on!