

CONVERSATIONS ON STRATEGY

PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

Zachary Griffiths and Leyton Summerlin The Harding Project

Lieutenant Colonel Zachary Griffiths and Sergeant First Class Leyton Summerlin of the Harding Project discuss military discourse and why it matters, the impact of professional writing, tips for aspiring writers, and more. Named after Major General Edwin Forrest Harding, the Harding project focuses on US Army professional publications with the intent to renew and revive them.

Keywords: Harding Project, professional discourse, US Army journals, writing, publishing

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Stephanie Crider (Host)

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I'm in the studio with Lieutenant Colonel Zachary Griffiths and Sergeant First Class Leyton Summerlin this morning to talk about professional military writing and the Harding Project.

Griffiths is a special assistant to the Chief of Staff of the Army and a career Special Forces officer with operational assignments in the 10th Special Forces Group. Zach currently directs the Harding Project, which is working to renew professional writing in the Army. Summerlin is a special assistant to the Chief of Staff of the Army and has spent 12 years in the Infantry, serving across several units. Layton is an amateur writer who was selected by the Sergeant Major of the Army to work on the Harding Project.

Tell me about the Harding Project. What are the Chief of Staff of the Army and the Sergeant Major of the Army initiatives and goals with professional writing for both officers and NCOs?

Lieutenant Colonel Zachary Griffiths

Stephanie, thanks so much for having us here today. The big goal of the Harding Project is just to renew professional writing in the Army. And so that means making it more accessible so that all soldiers can engage with this content, help the Army think faster [and] learn better. And that requires us to make some external reforms, like making a new website, so everyone can access the content. But then also internal ones, like looking at staffing, trying to make sure our old archives are accessible, and then working on education so everyone in the Army knows that these great outlets exist. And that's what I've been working on on behalf of the Chief of Staff.

And then Summerlin's got some great insights on what the Sergeant Major the Army is thinking about, too.

Sergeant First Class Leyton Summerlin

We have an interactive reading list that we have coming out. So, that will come out later this year, and the intent of that is to bring people back into the Army's body of knowledge [and] raise awareness about it. Every time we travel and we go talk to people, especially in the NCO Corps, there's not a lot of awareness that these journals exist to begin with. So then they have no chance of benefiting from it. So, the intent of the reading list is to get people to read first, get interested in it, know about it, and then the big call to action to try to share your experiences and contribute back.



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Another one of the initiatives that we just finished recently was we, in the [professional military educations or] PME courses for the NCO Corps, actually created a citation requirement where the students, [for] at least one writing assignment per course, they'll have to cite one of the Army's journals. And once again, the intent of that is just to get soldiers into the content and raise awareness that way and weave it into the fabric of the institutions.

Lieutenant Colonel Griffiths

We both draw inspiration from Harding. You know, it's his name, the Harding Project. But Major General Edwin Forrest Harding, in the 1930s, renewed both what's now called *Infantry*—which then was called *Mailing List*, out of Fort Benning, now Fort Moore—and then also the *Infantry Journal*, which is now *Army Magazine*. But this is not the first time the Army's had to reinvest and think about its journals. It's kind of a process that we go through over time. And so, we kind of draw explicit inspiration from him as we renew the Army's journals today.

Host

So, what brings you to the Army War College today?

Summerlin

We were invited to speak at the Nominative Leader Course. That's where we're going to head later this afternoon. So similar to this, we're just expanding our outreach and trying to show leaders who may not know what the Harding Project is what it's about [and] how we're here to help their formations. You know, it's about how do we help the Army learn faster and learn from our predecessors that have written into this body of knowledge and inspire them to, you know, maybe even start writing programs within their formations, or even reading programs. You know, things of that nature.

Griffiths

We're also hoping to have a workshop here at the War College where we're going to focus on making a special issue of *Military Review* that's focused on kind of how-to guides. And so, we're doing a recon for that, and then we hope to be back, and we're gonna hopefully convene authors of about 12 articles—how to write a book review, how to write an article, some of those things. The War College is a tremendous partner of the Harding Project, and we're really excited to be here today.

Host

I have met so many interesting people who have these amazing experiences. And if you say, "Why don't you write that down—even just for your grandkids?" They will not. They just don't want to. How do you address that challenge?

Summerlin

It's hard. And there's no way to get around that. One of the things we were just talking about before we came here was that there's tons of different ways to get started, but my personal way was what the Germans call "Sitzfleisch," and it's where you're passionate about something [and] you really want to share it with the world. And so you just sit there, and you get it done. You grind through it, and it's not pretty. Your first draft is always ugly.

Host

Right.

Summerlin

I'm an amateur writer myself, but I learned that the hard way, which, I think is good and beneficial. So that's one way to get through it.

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Griffiths

I knew, as a professional, something I should think about doing was writing down my experiences and sharing them. But I didn't really know how to get started. I didn't have the discipline of Summerlin.

So it actually took me going to grad school and taking a class on writing, and showing me that it really wasn't that hard.

And so that's why, as we think about some of the education reforms we are doing here, we want to make sure that everyone in the Army is shown how to write an article. And then maybe while they're a Career Course student or a student at the Advanced Leaders Course they have to write an article for *Infantry* magazine, as if for Army sustainment, and then some people will submit them. And so that's a great way to make it easier. The Army, for all of its big hierarchical structure, can make people do things and teach them. And so, to some extent, we can help that structure. Write one less essay in those assignments to make one more article. And so, people will be shown how to do it. So, I think that is also part of how we can help people get over that one-foot hurdle to get an article written.

Host

You actually answered my next question about how did you get into professional writing. So, grad school, and you had something that you really cared about.

Summerlin

Yes, ma'am. Yeah, yeah.

Host

What was it?

Summerlin

had ended up creating a class with some amazing people at MCOE.

Griffiths

That's the Maneuver Center at Fort Moore.

Summerlin

When I was a drill sergeant there. And towards the end of my tenure there, I was inspired to try to put it on paper so I could share it with other people who wanted to read it or pass it along to the guy who's coming after me so he can continue to teach these classes. That's where that discipline he was talking about came into play. I loved what I was doing, and I wanted to share with the world. And it just turned into a labor of love. But I got it done, and then *Infantry* magazine was right down the hall and I thought yeah, maybe this is just a way to immortalize it. And over the next 20 years there might be five people who are like me, who love to read the archives of these magazines and learn something. Maybe they'll get something out of it. So, that was it.

Griffiths

But tell us about the impact that it continues to have.

Summerlin

I actually just found out a couple weeks ago that the class that we were teaching at MCOE, that I developed, is still being taught. I was the MCOE Drill Sergeant of the Year (MCOE DSOY) while I was there, and what that is, is you train the incoming drill sergeants once they come to the installation—once they're post-academy graduates. So, we created this class, and then you're only in the seat for a year. So, I had to pass it on to somebody else. That was where I was challenged to put it on paper—so I could pass it off as best as possible.

And then, I just found out a couple weeks ago that the current MCOE DSOY— she is now teaching the same class. And anybody who shows particular interest or wants to talk more about it, she has told me that they are handing out

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the article that I wrote to include the workbook that I never submitted that I originally wanted to go into the *Infantry* magazine. So, to Colonel Griffith's point, you have no idea what kind of impact you can make when you do this kind of stuff.

Griffiths

You know, we do get a lot about impact. So, I think that's a good example where Summerlin wanted to capture what he'd been teaching. And then, lo and behold, it continues to have impact over a long time.

We do get questions—kind of back to your point of why should I write this down?

We have seen impact in a bunch of different ways. One where you see the most rewarding kind is where you say something and then there's an immediate policy change. The best examples of that are: there was an article written at the Modern War Institute calling for better tracking of foreign disclosure officers. This is kind of a wonky policy thing, but there was no way to track them. We've trained thousands, and they're really important to helping us work with our partners and allies. And so, he wrote an article that basically said, "Hey, this is a problem." And then the next month, the G1 creates a new additional skill identifier for them. It's tracked. So, it's a really clean story, right? This guy identifies a problem, he writes an article, and then there's an immediate policy. So that's very gratifying.

But General [Randy A.] George, when he talks about professional writing and what excites him about it, always refers to this article from *Infantry* from 1992, which was about how to run good training meetings. We don't know what impact that article had directly, but if 100 companies' training meetings were better run, that's a really significant impact. And so, I think that's a similar impact to what Summerlin's talking about, where his article then is used on a syllabus; it can be picked up in a class and taught to generations of folks. That's a big impact.

And then the final one is that some of these people will weigh in on a large debate within the Army. And so, an example might be multidomain operations, where that's evolved from multidomain battle to multidomain operations, and people say, "Well what about the tactical implications or the sustainment implications?" And that's where you're putting your finger on the scale just a little bit to influence this much larger Army debate. So, the impact is varied but can be real and it is, I would say, worth your time.

Host

Absolutely. Leighton, when were you there ?

Griffiths

At the Maneuver Center.

Summerlin

I was there from 2019 to 2021.

Host

So, it's not like you just left.

Summerlin

We're about to go on our third successor since I left.

Griffiths

Him writing that article, actually, is also how we found him as the lead NCO for this project—because it was a great article, and it explicitly called for some discourse on these topics. You don't know the impact you might have and the opportunities.

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People will ask, “Hey, what’s in this for me?” There’s opportunities that may come just because you put yourself out there or identify a neat idea. There’s also writing competitions that have cash prizes. There’s some really direct incentives. But what motivated me and Summerlin both to get started is this professional sense that you’re contributing to the profession and supporting it.

Host

Speaking of the profession, let’s talk about the importance of the Army’s professional journals.

Griffiths

I think they’re tremendously important. Harding, in 1930—who’s our namesake—talks about how they have two functions, and that’s to disseminate and to stimulate military thought. That’s how I think about it broadly. I think of them as helping connect [and] that disseminate is part of it. And so, when this whole project started, General George wrote an article that said, “Hey, we’re going to revitalize our professional journals since that’s an example of communicating from the top down. We’re out to the formation.”

There’s also cases where a single person might have an idea they want to share up. Maybe the battalion commander doesn’t see how he can solve this problem relating to professional journals or to command supply discipline, but a soldier says, “Hey, I can fix this.” Or, “I have an idea.” And so, they just put it out there and provide that upward feedback.

And then there is this horizontal function, too, where maybe I’m really into working with drones, and you’re really working into working with drones. But you’re at a totally different instillation hundreds of thousands of miles away. But if we both write about it, we can develop this community of interest where we work on this idea over time. That’s the third way.

We can also draw inspiration from our past. You know, *Armor* magazine was started in 1888. *Military Review* just celebrated its 100-year anniversary. And so, there’s this long body of knowledge that we contribute to, and it makes us better writers.

So those are the five functions I talked about.

Sergeant Summerlin, any thoughts?

Summerlin

The reason I think it’s important is [because] it helps the Army learn faster. The ability to influence PME and doctrine, just as an example, it’s along the same vein. If you have an idea and you’re able to clearly articulate it through writing, which we can all do better 99 percent of the time, and you’re able to share it more when you when you put it in writing, the faster and the better that we’d be able to influence our PME courses, what we’re teaching, and making sure that we’re teaching the right things and getting our voice heard about what we think is right and coming to a consensus through professional discourse.

So, that’s why I think it’s important.

Host

Risk. How can we underwrite risk with various publications?

Griffiths

In addition to the impact question that we get a lot, risk is the other big question. I would say a couple things here. First, if you’re writing professionally, you should make sure you clear your writing through your local public affairs officer and through your local intelligence officer. That’s the safest way to go. Generally, as I select things I want to write about, I’m not going to write about things that have operational significance. But so much of what we talk about is totally unclassified in a way people may not think about.

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So, you want to talk about force structure [or] you want to talk generically about new types of warfare—those are all fair game. And good topics for professional discussion.

I would also say there are some people who discourage writing because they think there's gonna be risk to their career or they're gonna say something unpopular. And I just really think it's overstated. I've written many, many articles, and I've never had any issues, personally. I also did a survey of 68 military authors for an article in *Military Review* last summer, and only one person reported any sort of issue. So, the overwhelming majority of these folks have had no career repercussions, and I think there's really a lot of benefits. Because I had a background in writing, I was offered a position to lead a Commanders in Action Group just because they knew I could communicate in writing. And if you're disciplined about what you're writing about, and thoughtful, you're not gonna have any problems at all.

Parameters is a great—well, I think it's actually a monograph, but you know, *Lying to Ourselves* [*Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession*] is such a classic piece. It's so good. They're doing a professional service there in helping the Army think harder about its requirements. So, anyone should be proud to have been able to point out a challenge and then try to help the Army rectify it. And I know General George and the senior leaders in the Army are all trying to make the Army better and work on our professions.

Summerlin

The only thing I would add is that professional discourse is a two-way street. If somebody writes an unpopular opinion, then it's on us as leaders to remind ourselves that maybe it's just unpopular to us, but it's still worth listening to and discussing. It takes maturity on both sides, takes vulnerability on the writer's side, takes a sense of accountability on the leader's side to say, "Well, maybe I don't agree with it, but maybe it's worth the discussion, especially if they can clearly articulate their side.

Host

All great points. So, how does this all tie into the Army War College and the Strategic Studies Institute?

Griffiths

So, the Army War College produces a tremendous amount of knowledge, and we see all the monographs that students publish every year, but we would love to see more of those put out into articles that the Army can use. The monographs are a huge production and a ton of work, but really few people are going to get into those, whereas the journals are going to push that content out to the Army. I'm not asking the Army War College to rethink the graduation requirements in that report, but I do think it would be great to see more programs like the Carlisle Scholars program have a requirement to publish. And so, if you're a War College student today, you might think, "Hey, could I adapt my monograph into an article for *Parameters*?" In the fall [of 2023], the Chief of Staff recognized Colonel [Katie] Crombe, who wrote her monograph for her project on Ukraine and then republished that with Dr. [John A.] Nagl into an article for *Parameters*. But also *Military Review*, your branch magazine, those are all great places that you can get your thoughts out there into the world. You spent a year working on it— let's share that and get some conversations going.

Summerlin

How I think it ties to the SSI is the population that's here, just getting that population to start thinking about how they can get the bulk of their formations involved and possibly start writing. We actually just received a piece from an NCO that we're going to publish on our Substack where he talked about the importance of reading over writing, and I think there's a lot of truth to that. That's how you get people inspired. So, for this population, I think that one of the big takeaways is how do you get your guys involved?

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Griffiths

To that point, I think that's totally right. If these leaders here go back when they lead brigades or senior units in the Army, they can have a major influence. And so, to that end, we just recently published a how-to guide through *Military Review*. It's available on our Substack at [Hardingproject.com](https://hardingproject.com), if you click on the how-to tab. It provides some great instructions from the squadron commander of 1-8 Cav (First Cavalry Division) on how to run a unit writing program. If you're a leader leaving here and you want to start a unit writing program at your unit, there's a great guide there. And we're going to roll out a bunch more. And in fact, that special issue of *Military Review* is going to put all those together so that anyone in the Army that wants to get started with writing has some guidance to start.

Host

Let's wrap it up with some best practices and writing tips. What do you have?

Griffiths

That's a big one. I would say my big thought on writing is that if you have an idea, you should jot it down. And so, what I do is I open a Google doc on my phone, and I will start to build out an idea and then maybe come back to it. Some of these projects may take months or years. You know, it's not a continuous work.

Right now, Sergeant Summerlin and I've been kicking around this idea about drones, treating them as ammunition rather than as an end item. And so, I've written notes on this, and I'll leave it for a month and I'll come back to it. And at some point, I'll probably write that into a full piece. And so that's kind of my thought on process overall. You know, I would ask that anyone that's interested in this podcast go to hardingproject.com, follow our Substack. We're on social media. We're doing a bunch of podcasts. We also do post visits like we're here at the Army War College today. And so, we just encourage everyone to get involved with professional writing and reach out if they have any questions.

Host

Zach. Leyton. Thank you for making time to speak with me today.

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