






They Love a Man in Uniform

Romance novels featuring heroes
– and now heroines – from all
branches of the armed services
hold an enduring appeal.

**By Nanette Lavoie-Vaughan
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ROMANCES MAKE UP the biggest-selling fiction category in the publishing industry. The Romance Writers of America (RWA) estimates almost 65 million Americans read romance fiction — defined as a novel that contains a central love story with a satisfying and optimistic ending. The field saw \$1.38 billion in sales and the release of 8,090 new titles in 2007.

War long has been a setting for historical romances; stories set during the Civil War remain very popular, as do those featuring heroes finding love between battles in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and Operation Desert Storm. But editors say most military romances published these days fall into the contemporary and suspense categories.

Harlequin, one of the oldest romance publishers, has been publishing novels with military characters since the 1970s. Debbie Macomber's NAVY series began in 1988, and the military romance genre saw significant growth in the 1990s.

Many military romance titles are written by authors who draw upon their personal experience in the armed service to add authenticity to their stories. Merline Lovelace, Lindsay McKenna, and, more recently, Catherine Mann, Cindy Dees, and Susan Grant have become reader favorites for their unique military series.

In 2002, Lovelace, one of the first female Air Force base commanders, and McKenna, who had been an aerographer's mate (meteorologist)

with the Navy, founded ROMVETS, an organization of romance writers who have served in the military. The organization now boasts more than

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80 members representing the Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Army (as well as the FBI).

ROMVET members share their military knowledge and experience with fellow authors and aspiring

writers. Their ranks include intelligence officers; pilots; linguists; JAG, CID, and MP officers; medical personnel; machinists; communications and electronics specialists; and combat correspondents. The inside knowledge of military life they convey in their novels has resulted in a rabid fan base and, subsequently, coveted spots on *The New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists. Several ROMVET members also have won the RITA award, presented each year by the RWA for excellence in writing within specific genres of romance fiction.

More than a uniform

A military romance novel isn't just a story in which the main character wears a uniform. There are a wide variety of military-themed plots and characters that make each book unique and appealing. Some of the most popular storylines include a hero and heroine who are officers in direct opposition; a hero or heroine as CO; secret missions; special forces in action; military pilots; and trauma specialists.

What makes the military hero so appealing to romance writers and their readers? Patience Smith, editor of romantic suspense for Harlequin, explains it this way: “The military hero is the man who fights for our country and, more specifically, tries to keep the heroine and the family safe.”

In most military-themed romance novels, the hero is sent on a dangerous mission that usually involves the heroine in some capacity. Along the way, they face obstacles and find romance. “Throughout the journey,” says Smith, “the hero has to face his darkness, come to grips with his experiences, and accept love in his life.”

Although military men historically have been romance heroes, military heroines are on the rise. As more women take on greater responsibilities in the armed forces, fiction mir-

rors reality, with military heroines serving as the hero's partner — or CO.

The military hero or heroine's willingness to face hardships and lay his or her life on the line is a given; such characters almost always exhibit core military principles of honor, decency, loyalty, and commitment to country.

"There's a sense of focus and purpose about military people," says Mary Margret Daughtridge, author of the popular "SEALed" series. "They know who they are and why they're there. It is a tremendously attractive and inspiring quality."

The larger draw for readers is finding what lies beneath a character's hard military persona. Military training teaches servicemembers to focus on duty and the mission and keep their emotions in check while logic and safety prevail. In most military romance novels, the hero or heroine's vulnerable, sensitive side is revealed through his or her fears, secrets, and quirks — and that's what keeps the reader turning the pages and asking for more.

It's all in the details

In addition to the story and the appeal of the characters, many readers are enthralled with the technical aspects of a military-themed romance. Every branch of service has its own jargon, and writers employ it to lend authenticity to their stories. The tricky part, however, is using the appropriate terms without having to explain them.

"I want the books to be understood by the reader, who won't automatically know that IBS stands for inflatable boat, small, which is the SEALs' Zodiac. So, I use it mostly in dialogue," says JoAnn Ross, author of *The New York Times*-listed *Crossfire* (Signet, 2008).

Terry Spear, a military retiree who writes romantic suspense novels, says, "I like to use places where I have served, since I know firsthand what it

was like. There are small details that a servicemember will gather when they have worked in a job in the military. [I've] used a combination of situations

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from when I worked as a personnel actions officer at Fort Meade, Md., and the hand-to-hand combat and weapons training I learned in all of my romantic suspense novels."

Authors without military experience rely on research and interviews with active and retired military personnel to obtain accurate information. This includes not only jargon but also equipment, job duties, and details of military life.

Fiction reflects reality

Many spouses of servicemembers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan find themselves reading more romance novels while their partners are

deployed. An escape into the fantasy world of romance fiction while waiting for their own hero to return is time well-spent.

The current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have not changed the volume of military romances being published, but they have influenced authors' sensitivity. Many authors are reluctant to set novels in current war zones, but they often address common post-battle scenarios such as PTSD and disabilities.

And while most military-themed romances focus on contemporary action plots, medical-themed romances; historical romance set in earlier wars; inspirational romances focusing on the faith and love that sustain through trying times; and the growing genre of paranormal romance all hold a place for the military hero or heroine.

Publishers and authors see a place for military romance continuing in the broader field of romantic fiction. With the Sept. 11, 2001, attack still a strong memory and the current wars continuing, authors seek to show a servicemember's hope as he or she overcomes an unpleasant experience — and finds lasting love along the way. **MO**