

About This Book

This is a book for fans who want to know the inside story of The Night Stalkers series. This is a book for those interested in the process of writing and the process of story development. This book is for me.

A chapter is dedicated to each book in the series to date. I do my best to capture what drove me to write each story, both the background plot and the love story. I also included some of what did and didn't make it into the finished books. The "Extended Edition" of this work contains the complete text of the three related novellas as well as a Night Stalkers Christmas short story, my first-ever short story and my first-ever short story sale. I open the book with a brief commentary about the real-life Night Stalkers, for that has been a fascinating road of discovery on its own and it's what launched me into writing this series.

This book contains spoilers, because I look at the whole of each story. But I try not to reveal any important spoilers before the discussion any individual book, so you may alternate reading

the chapters of this book with the volumes in the series, or read the entire series first.

This book is a romantic voyage through the writing of this series and how me-the-person was changed by what me-the-author was writing.

As I sign so many of my books, because it is so true:

I hope you have even half the fun
reading this book as I did writing it!

-M.L. "Matt" Buchman
Oregon Coast, U.S., January 12, 2014

My Goal

Once I decided to use the real-life Night Stalkers as the core of my series, I laid out two very strong guidelines that I'll discuss in more detail as we go along:

- Absolute respect for what these men and women do as part of their service
- To have my facts as correct as research could make them. I may idealize situations for the sake of my romance audience, but I strove constantly, and still do, to be as accurate and real as possible.

The generous kind feedback from my growing fan base within the military tells me that I have to some reasonable extent achieved these two goals. I have heard from Black Hawk crew chiefs who served in Iraq, career U.S. Army helicopter pilots, boots-on-the-ground grunts (both male and female), and even one man who flew for SOAR on the DAP Hawk helicopter that this series is based upon.

I love the excitement of my romance fan base, but when I receive a positive comment from a military fan, it is an honor that humbles me every time.

Any errors in the stories' details are my own and I apologize for them in advance.

The Real-Life Night Stalkers

AN INTRODUCTION

The Night Stalkers, as they call themselves, are real. They are also known as the United States Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (airborne) or SOAR(a). Their mission is to fly helicopters for the U.S. Special Forces, delivering those troops where no one else can, and then getting them back out. They are universally acknowledged as the best helicopter pilots on the planet, by both America's allies as well as her foes.

How do you recognize them? Simple, you don't. They won't appear in public in a uniform with a Night Stalkers patch. They won't brag in a bar. Their entire mission is to not be seen, not be noticed. If you go to your local big bookstore or major library, you will find whole shelves on SEALs and Delta Force, though much of the latter has little to do with what I can discover of the reality. If you find even one book about the Night Stalkers in either place, it will be unusual. Over the years of research, I

have collected and read almost every book there is about them, it takes up barely a foot of shelf space.

But have you already heard of their missions? Oh yes.

- The invasion of Grenada
- The invasion of Panama to depose Noriega
- The halt of Iranian mine-laying operations in the Red Sea during the oil embargoes
- The terrible Battle of Mogadishu only slightly fictionalized in *Black Hawk Down*.
- The Battle of Takur Ghar fictionalized in *Lions for Lambs*
- The “Christmas War Movie” of 2013, opening as I write this, *Lone Survivor*, heavily involved the 160th
- The flight into and back out of bin Laden’s compound
- Hostage rescues from Somali beaches and pirated ships
- And many other events of which we will never hear.

Are we aware of them? Almost never.

For example, the taking of Osama bin Laden in his Pakistan compound generated huge amounts of coverage, probably one of the most thoroughly covered military events since the first night of Desert Storm. There have been volumes written, movies made, and endless news programs broadcast. I had done sufficient research by the day the news broke of the mission and its success to feel confident that those were SOAR’s fliers. I had learned enough of their tactics to guess what other assets were in the area, what layers of backups existed, and so on.

In the over sixty articles that I read in the first two days, I found only one that mentioned it was SOAR. Everyone else simply named “U.S. Army” or “U.S. Special Forces” helicopters. A couple even identified them as the SEALs helicopters, except I’ve never found that the SEALs have any; they use SOAR. I found one other reference confirming that it was them in *No*

Easy Day, the account written by “Mark Owen” of Seal Team Six who was on the mission. A few other resources have since included them as at least participating in Operation Neptune Spear, but only a few.

THE FOUNDING

In 1979, the newly formed Iran took fifty-two Americans hostages. Operation Eagle Claw was mounted to fly helicopters into the middle of the Iranian Desert and deliver Delta and Ranger teams into the heart of Tehran to rescue them. It failed for many reasons including poor communication plans, insufficient night-vision technology, and a deployment of Sea Stallion helicopters that were never intended for deep-desert crossings. A sandstorm damaged one chopper and drove another back, not realizing due to communication blackouts, that if they had increased altitude or continued even a small distance further, they would have flown clear of the storm.

The operation ended in disaster when a chopper, blinded within its own dust brown-out, collided with a parked fuel tanker. The resulting explosion killed eight servicemen and caused the abandonment of all of the helicopters. The bodies were eventually returned, but two of the choppers left intact on the ground still serve in the Iranian navy.

Further rescue plans and extensive negotiations failed for various reasons; including allegations, on-going even today, that the Reagan campaign made a deal with Iran that it would be a far friendlier administration than Carter’s if they just held the release until after the inauguration. Whether or not these allegations are true, ultimately, the Iranian government brought down an American President—they released the hostages just twenty minutes after President Reagan was sworn in as President Carter’s replacement.

All politics aside, a small group of men swore this would never happen again. They gathered behind a locked gate in a disused back corner of Fort Campbell, Kentucky and began

practicing maneuvers and techniques that no one had ever tried before.

They flew their helicopters “nap-of-earth” at high speeds. Often so low that they literally flew under power lines and had to climb up to avoid road signs.

They flew at night, because everyone said it couldn’t be done.

They developed the technology for mid-air refueling of helicopters to vastly extend their mission time and range. It also meant they no longer needed auxiliary tanks and could instead carry more troops or weaponry.

They improved night-vision technology until they could fly nap-of-earth in the dark. They ruled the night which led them to adopt, as one of their mottos: “Death Waits in the Dark.” And when the Night Stalkers flew their missions, that became a truth.

THE EQUIPMENT

They drove and innovated dozens of technologies that are in use today by large portions of the U.S. Armed Forces. Equipment was updated, tested to failure, then updated again. They worked on everything from radar and infrared cameras to knives and survival vests. Even their rifles, which they wear folded across their chests while they fly, were designed and built to Night Stalker requirements.

However, first and foremost, the 160th are helicopter pilots. They chose three helicopter platforms and drove the designs so far ahead that they were embedding people in the manufacturer’s engineering teams to make sure innovations were done the way they wanted. They chose and, after many upgrades, now depend upon:

- The high-survivability of the MH-60M Sikorsky “Black Hawk,” in transport and attack versions
- The agile two-seater MH-6M “Little Bird” built by MD and Boeing in transport and attack versions

- The massive twin-rotor MH-47G “Chinook” also built by Boeing, capable of carrying 50 troops or dipping into the water to pick up a speeding boat of Special Forces directly into its cargo bay

The first four novels and their accompanying novellas of The Night Stalkers series were all based on the attack version of the Black Hawk, the Direct Action Penetrator or DAP. The transport Black Hawk can carry eleven troops in addition to the four-person crew. The DAP really can't carry anyone beyond her crew, because they're carrying so much extra weight in technology, weapons, and ammunition. It is generally considered to be the single most lethal helicopter ever flown into the night sky. The fliers of the DAPs have their own motto because of the incredible firepower they carry aloft: “We Deal in Steel.”

These are very rare machines, perhaps a dozen exist, probably not two dozen. What better setting for my romances?

If you're sneaky, you'll see a pattern here:

- Four seats in a DAP Hawk equals four romances
 - *The Night Is Mine*
 - *I Own the Dawn*
 - *Wait Until Dark*
 - *Take Over at Midnight*
 - I wrote the three novellas, fitting into the series as I'll discuss later, to play with some of my favorite side characters. The characters were all non-military, but the DAP Hawk figures in each story.
- Two seats in the attack version of the MH-6M “Little Bird” equals the second flight of two more romances starting with *Light Up the Night* and a book in progress not yet titled.
- If the series remains popular, I see two different ways to go:

- A five-book series of the five positions aboard the massive Chinook aircraft
- A four-book series following the fliers and medics of CSAR, the Combat Search-and-Rescue version of the Black Hawk—in its own way as unique as the DAP
- Or some third way I haven't thought of yet

THE TRAINING

Before I get into the stories, let me talk for just a moment about the training. As I'll discuss in more depth in the section "Birth of a Series," I'm as surprised as anyone that I'm writing military-based novels.

I became intrigued by, and deeply wanted to understand, the career soldier. So I began reading. I read about units and their deeds. I read about current operations. But mostly I read the memoirs of the retired soldiers who had served in the U.S. Special Forces. While they do it for different reasons, that I attempt to address in my fiction, this is not something that they do lightly.

To get into the Special Operations Aviation Regiment the climb is as hard as any out there, except perhaps Deltas and SEALs. I have a military fan who described them as:

“...something other. I always wanted to fly with them, but I was never good enough. They're like you write in your books, it's as if their flying instincts are built into their blood chemistry. They're just that good.”

These guys aren't just good, they're the rock stars of their craft—except recognition, even notice outside the team, is placed right at the bottom of their list.

Basic qualifications:

- Volunteer for the Army.

- Fly a minimum of five years for the Army, but ten is probably too many. Apparently people who are too senior don't transition well into the Night Stalkers' non-standard training and tactics.
- Volunteer for Airborne including jump certification.
- Brutal physical tests including, among many others: the Navy Swim Test and SERE, a three-week course entitled Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape.
- Volunteer for the Regiment.
- The average monthly pool of accepted applications is a dozen. Sixty percent will be eliminated during the service review, called "Packet Assessment". Frequently half of those will not survive "Assessment Week". It is said to be as brutal psychologically as the SEAL's Hell Week.
- Secret-level clearance or better.
- Survive the Green Platoon testing/training which can take up to eight months.
- Once accepted, it will be at least two more years of training before being declared FMQ—Fully Mission Qualified...and more.

These are people dedicated to a level of service that I can't even imagine. Yet I felt compelled to try and illustrate their commitment in fiction.

ONE LAST NIGHT STALKER STORY

In 1993, the Night Stalkers along with a mixed force of U.S. Rangers and Delta Force operators were given the opportunity to capture an entire echelon of a brutal Somali warlord's inner cabinet. The problem was, the opportunity came in broad daylight.

Unable to delay for the cover of darkness, the Night Stalkers took to the sky at two in the afternoon. Everything was on plan until rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) managed to down not

one, but two SOAR Black Hawks and damage a third. By the end of the sixteen-hour battle, there were eighteen Americans dead, eighty wounded, and one captured. There were one-to-three thousand Somali casualties, the true numbers will never be known.

The Night Stalker pilot in captivity, Michael Durant, was held for eleven days in terrible conditions with a broken leg and a badly injured back, more fortunate than his three dead crewmates or the two Delta Force snipers who died attempting to rescue him from the chopper. They were killed, defiled, and their bodies were dragged through the streets; one was even beheaded. The Red Cross was able to carry out a letter from the pilot for his wife. There was one thing on the letter that the Red Cross attempted to black out because they didn't know its meaning, and they had to protect their role of neutrality to do the amazing work they do.

Chief Warrant Officer 3 Michael Durant had scribed a four-letter note at the bottom of the letter to tell his wife that he would be coming home and that he hadn't given up hope. And he didn't. After he was released and healed from his injuries, he returned to fly with SOAR for eight more years.

His note to his wife read: "NSDQ."

"Night Stalkers Don't Quit"
— the official motto of the 160th SOAR —

Birth of a Series

THE HELICOPTER

The Night Stalkers as a series had a small birth. Every idea for a book is different, and the “instigating thought” is often elusive. But this one, I know exactly where it came from.

In 2006 I was writing a fast-paced, light-hearted romp I ultimately titled *Swap Out!* The pitch usually sounds something like this:

Swap Out! is a foodie thriller in which U.S. Special Forces are hunting down America’s top television chefs. Only one man knows why...and he’s next!

It is a thriller with strong romance elements. I’d been wanting to write a romance for some time as all my books, *all*, have a love story at the heart of them. But I was also torn by how much fun my upbeat thriller was to write. This tipping point will become crucial later.

In the early chapters of *Swap Out!* Jeff “the Chef” Davis is kidnapped and held for questioning on an unused floor of one of Chicago’s highest skyscrapers. I needed him to be rescued by a really cool helicopter. I don’t know why he needed that particular rescue as I had little idea of who might be flying it, he just did. (It later became a seminal moment that shaped the whole story. Go figure.)

So, I began researching just what that helicopter would be—the Comanche RAH-66 was my final choice. It is one of the nastiest helicopters *never* built. They built two demonstrator models (YAH-66s) before cancelling the contract because the Army kept adding in more and more requirements after the fact until finally the original airframe design couldn’t hold up under all of the changes. Now that I had my rescue helicopter in hand, Shelley Thomas could fly in to rescue Jeff.

A funny side note before we leave *Swap Out!* behind. I indie-published the book May 2011, before the release of even the first Night Stalker book, and it has been doing very nicely (thank you, fans). Along about book #3 of the Night Stalkers, I received a piece of fan mail.

“I can’t wait to see how you transition the paranoid conspiracy theorist in *Swap Out!* into the commander in the Night Stalkers.”

I just about died. I had inadvertently named my villain in one series with the same name as my hero in another: Mark Henderson. Two things immediately occurred: 1) my wonderful and patient wife read through every single one of my published books (about ten by that point) and created a master names/roles list for me, and 2) I learned to appreciate another aspect of indie-publishing, when I was able to go back slip a name change in on my *Swap Out!* villain without him really noticing. Sigh! If you own a copy of that book with a villain named “Mark Henderson,” it is now a rare commodity.

(It's amazing the things I've learned the hard way becoming an author and publisher.)

Back to where I was: I had a helicopter for Shelley to fly, but I also had picked up another nugget that I'd stumbled on along the way. It's called "serendipitous research" and it's why I do much of my own research even though I married a research librarian with an MLIS, Masters in Library and Information Science. While researching the Comanche, I also stumbled on this odd little outfit called SOAR.

THE SERIES IDEA

Having too much curiosity, a good trait in writers—not so good for cats—I began poking around SOAR. It was like a low-grade toothache, I knew there was something there, but I didn't know what just yet.

I had been consciously looking for an interesting and challenging idea for a while. Clive Cussler has said that he created his hero Dirk Pitt to be half Doc Savage and half James Bond. His name was even made to match James Bond, two monosyllabic names. In the first book, *Raise the Titanic*, Dirk Pitt didn't even appear for most of the book. But the readers' response told Mr. Cussler he had a hit in the character and Dirk moved front and center.

Sandra Brown practically created the genre of romantic suspense when she rammed a love story and a detective story together.

Suzanne Brockmann created the genre of military romantic suspense when she discovered the Navy SEALs and decided to write romances about them.

So, for several years, I had been keeping my eye out, hoping to stumble on such an idea.

I finally found it, of all odd places, in the 160th SOAR's on-line application. It was changed in June 2013, but this was back in 2008—four years before *The Night Is Mine* was released and Emily Beale would enter the world. Back in those long ago

times, the application clearly stated that women need not apply for any combat or flight positions.

In that instant I knew I had it. It became the kernel at the center of the entire series:

The first women of SOAR,
so good they couldn't keep them out...
and the men they deserve.

A military romantic suspense, technology-centric, and with a very strong female lead.

TURNING AN IDEA INTO A STORY

When I look back at my notes, such as they are, I see that roughly a year lay between the end of *Swap Out!* and the first draft of *The Night Is Mine*.

I spent much of 2008 studying. I read dozens of books, hundreds of articles, followed websites, and so on. I read Night Stalker memoirs, including Michael Durant's two books *The Night Stalkers* and *In the Company of Heroes*—recounting his incarceration during the Battle of Mogadishu. I read SEAL memoirs, including Chuck Pfarrer's fine autobiography, *The Warrior Soul*. I read books on flying helicopters. I read Black Hawk service manuals. I read Army hand-to-hand combat manuals... The list goes on.

Why did I do all of this?

There is another part of choosing this story that is also seminal in my writing about the Night Stalkers. In my research I had learned to respect not only the individuals who chose to serve, but also the ideals they struggle to uphold.

Along the way, I had developed a near-unbreakable fascination with the Night Stalkers. I wasn't so fascinated with what they did, although that was certainly intriguing. After all, who isn't intrigued by a cool, secret helicopter team? What really captured my attention was why they did it.

CRAFTING A FRAMEWORK

I decided that I didn't want to focus on the conflicts at large. I didn't want to tell the story of war. Not having experienced that, I didn't feel qualified to tell it. I also find that to be such a depressing aspect of the world's condition, both past and present, that I didn't want to go there. I wasn't interested in either glorifying or damning those involved. I'll leave those stories for others to tell.

I want to tell the story of the people themselves. No matter what reason caused them to sign up: country, honor, cool toys, the chance to blow shit up, because they couldn't find any other job that interested them, or one that paid; it's not why they stay.

What connects them together is also not, much to my surprise, a belief in a higher cause as I'd originally thought. As a naïve child of too much marketing and too many movies, I had thought that patriotism, duty, and honor were what bound them together. I could never make sense of that. Those elements are there—defense of their country is definitely a part of it—but it is not the overwhelming theme. For indeed, there is one theme that is far and away the most common among Special Forces career soldiers.

The dots that connect them every time is: each other. The career soldier has learned that nothing is more important than the people with whom they serve. I've spoken with a helicopter crew chief who talked about the worst thing on a crew: it's being the one who *wasn't* hit by the bullet.

“It should have been me. And we all feel that way. They even send in counselors to the surviving crew members every time no matter how much we hate it, because we all know that if we had flown better, shot differently, leaned differently, our crewmate would still somehow be alive.”

I think one of the best portrayals of that moment may be by Tom Cruise in *Top Gun* as he tries to come to terms with his own role in the death of Goose, his Rear Officer.

Inside the Special Forces, the team is the essential unit of the military. Not company or battalion, not regiment or which branch of the service. It is the people that they serve with—the individuals. All else is built upon that base layer. We see this narrow aspect portrayed so rarely in the movies.

After all of this study, I now knew the scale of the story I wanted to tell. I wanted to tell the story of the people who fly for SOAR. Rather than just their tactics or their mission profiles, I wanted to write about what it meant to form that team. In order for that team to become closer than family, I think the team becomes an extension of each soldier's self-identity. Nothing is more powerful than a reflection of yourself at the level of, "You are so important, I would rather be the one who died." While it might not be true in the long term—survival instincts are crucial—at that moment of loss, they would rather not be the survivor.

Can I, the writer who never served a single day, understand this? As Plato with his shadowed figures cast by a fire's light as silhouettes on a cave wall, the answer is: a little bit. It is that little bit, that small window of understanding that I struggle to bring to light. Something I'll talk about more later is substitution. As a writer, I try to find a substitute reference when I wish to evoke a setting or an emotion. Once I thought of it that way, it was surprisingly easy: I would step in front of the gun and take the bullet for my family anytime, anywhere. That must be how they feel about each other.

It is also in choosing to tell the story this way that the conflicts I had set up within myself could be resolved. I may agree or disagree with a policy choice that sends our armed forces into harm's way. But that is "above the pay grade" of my characters. In my stories, they've already been sent. Now they have orders to follow and must do their duty even as their personal stories unfold.

But I didn't want to completely ignore how hard those decisions must be for the commanders to make or I'd risk my characters becoming mere pawns in the story. Again, I did a melding. I had merged two ideas for my story: military and romance. Now I did the same for the stakes: those who serve and those who command.

THE STAKES

I'm an analytical person. I take things apart to see what makes them tick. First thing I did to my first computer back in 1981 (non-PC compatible), was to strip off the cover and go through the whole system to see how it was built.

I had "taken apart" any number of stories in several genres from thrillers to science fiction. The stakes are always high. National in scope! The survival of humankind! The death of a city! A civilization! All life on Earth! In the universe!

Even in a romance, stakes are terribly high. What could be a greater risk than falling in love, giving your heart, and perhaps having it cast back unwanted? (Except over here in the romance genre we know there's a happy ending waiting for us somewhere, thank goodness.)

High stakes and near impossible command decisions. I finally figured out that I should go straight to the top. And who is the highest military commander in the United States? The Commander-in-Chief, the President of the United States. That meant that when the team followed their orders and flew their mission, the stakes would be of national consequence. Even if they didn't always know what or why.

But neither were they automatons. These were the nation's elite soldiers. They had to understand, when it was time for them to do so.

That is one of the cool tricks a fiction writer has in their arsenal. Stephen King in his wonderful book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* talks about a writer's toolbox. We study, we practice, we tinker, and with each of those actions, we manage

to put another tool in our writer's toolbox. Some of them we use every minute: spelling, punctuation, grammar. Some not quite so continuously: cliffhangers, character arc, pacing. Maybe there are even some obscure ones that we may only use once or twice in a career. It all depends on the demands of that particular act of storytelling.

Some of the tools are tiny, some huge. One of the ones I've learned over the years and try to use on every book, it's kind of average-sized, but always useful:

Let the reader know more than your characters until near the ending. Then have your characters know more than your reader.

I have no idea where I first heard it, but it's a very interesting tool. To engage a reader: let them know more about the situation than the characters do. It makes the reader feel informed and on the path. However, if the writer doesn't break this at some point, the characters don't take on a life of their own.

And that's one of the key things we read for: the exceptional moment of the exceptional character. It is not his magic that makes Harry Potter so engaging; it is his bravery, his integrity, and above all his loyalty. It is this that makes him so exceptional to us. And that is the true secret that we don't learn about him until nearly the end of the first book. Then J.K. Rowling doesn't merely repeat that in each following book, she has Harry prove it repeatedly through harder and harder challenges.

It is when the character manages to step past what the reader has been told about them, and the reader learns from the character themselves, that the characters really come to life and become memorable.

It also dramatically increases the tension when the reader unexpectedly finds themselves caught up on the character's coattails as the ending draws near.

My writing mentor, the multi-*New York Times* and *USA Today* Bestseller Dean Wesley Smith, tells me that he practices something new with every book. Taking that lesson to heart, in each book of *The Night Stalkers* series I'm working on something different, which I'll try to identify as I discuss each one. But I also knew I was tackling a series.

One of the things I set out to consciously work with in this series was the layering of stakes. I wanted to take several different tiers of stakes and try to wind them together into a single, engaging whole. Here are the main ones:

- the immediate danger of the situations my characters are in
- the high stakes of whatever the reason is behind their orders
- the personal stakes of their own survival—as they are soldiers, this was an obvious and dramatic stake, life or death
- the personal stakes of their own heart, of falling in love

PEELING APART STORY

You shouldn't be able to do that. During a conference session at the Romance Writers of America national conference in Dallas, 1996, I was told that a romance follows a simple rule:

If you can take the romance out of the story and it remains intact, it's not a romance.

I firmly believe that. Now, let's go a little further. I don't just write romances, I write romantic suspense. Even more constricting, I writing military romantic suspense. (At least in *The Night Stalkers* series. My Angelo's Hearth series is a straight contemporary romance.)

In taking on *Military + Romance + Suspense*, I had to wind them inextricably together. You shouldn't be able to peel off any

one of the strands and still have the story work. Let's see if I can describe it in a little more detail.

- The *military* background of my characters defines their value system, their attitude, and their interactions. Captain Emily Beale is not going to refuse an order, no matter what. It is built into the deep core of integrity and her training. She would neither command the respect nor attract the mate she does, if it weren't for that core. Her military command structure is also going to interfere with her romance.
- The *romantic* interests of my characters are fueled by that tight teamwork and collaboration that occurs within high-danger, high-stress situations. Their love story is interdependent with the military background. If I tried to pick up this love story and drop it into, say, a modern corporate office setting, it would collapse. It needs that military structure and those values to drive them together.
- If I attempted to peel out the *suspense*, it would lose its ultimate purpose as well as its momentum. Instead, I wind the military and suspense elements tighter and tighter together until the characters' lives depend on each other. And ultimately, their survival and their mission success depend on them loving each other. You'll see that final crucial key in every one of my stories. That moment of perfect trust, of absolute assured reliance on each other, that finally solves the suspense element.

That's the goal anyway.

I attempted to do the same thing with the levels of stakes in the story. The command stakes, which drive the military plot stakes, which drive the suspense stakes, which ultimately drive the love story.

THINKING AHEAD

Do I plan all of this ahead of time? For the most part... Good God, No!

Much of the above discussion is what I now recognize as an unconscious process. That's one of the wonders of story. In *On Writing*, Stephen King says that there is no way to make a bad writer a good one, or a good one into a great one. But you can make a good writer into a better writer. The main thing you can do is practice.

Interestingly, my breakout novel, *The Night Is Mine*, is just over the million-words-of-writing mark for me, a fair bit of practice.

So, when I was first starting this series, I had a lot of words under my belt. I was also just coming to realize that was precisely what I was doing—practice. My mentor, with over a hundred novels behind him, still consciously picks something to practice on with each book.

In retrospect, I can see what I was attempting with this series. By now, passing the two million word mark, I know beforehand which craft element I'm going to be working on for the next novel.

But writing a novel is not all about craft, or practice, or planning. The author must put themselves on the page.

DRAWING ON MY OWN STRENGTHS

“Write what you know!”

How many times are writers told that? I'm assuming that Thomas Harris wasn't much of a serial killer before or after he wrote *Silence of the Lambs*. The statement becomes even more patently ridiculous when you start to consider science fiction or high fantasy, faeries and their ilk.

Or does it?

I've never flown in a helicopter and I've never served in the military. But as a writer, I have a set of skills I could substitute for the purposes of romantic suspense.

One of them was that I pursued a childhood dream and earned my private pilot's license shortly after college and was

well on my way to my instrument rating. Regrettably, it was discovered that I was just sufficiently red-green colorblind that I would probably never be able to make a career of flying. What it gave me though was knowledge of how flying feels. I know radio work, navigation systems, stalls, simulated engine failures, rules of flying in different types of weather. All of those pieces remain the same.

With this as a basis, I began my research. I found on-line manuals. I borrowed library books. I attended an airshow where I had the chance to sit in a Coast Guard helicopter pilot's seat and interview the pilot. I also was able to interview the wonderful woman I mentioned before who flew two tours in Iraq as a crew chief on a Sikorsky Black Hawk for the Screaming Eagles, the 101st airborne. That interview was an amazing two hours of my life.

Having never served in the military required me to do immense amounts of reading, research, and interviews. Thirty years as a corporate project manager taught me what makes civilian teams and breaks them. With a black belt in Taekwondo, I learned some things about hand-to-hand fighting, as well as some work with staff, knife, and disarming techniques. I have a number of close friends who did serve and have been kind enough to share some of their experiences, especially how they felt about that service. My heartfelt thanks to all of the military folks who helped me understand their path.

Was substitution a successful method? The series' popularity and the fan mail that I'm receiving from the military tell me it has been. Thank goodness.

When writing setting, I work to base it as much as possible on actual experiences:

- Emily's trip through the White House security trailer in *The Night Is Mine* is something I experienced as chaperone on a field trip with my step-daughter's

eighth-grade class right down to the narrow ramp and the color of the carpet.

- Archie's sailing vacation in *I Own the Dawn* is based on a variety of experiences from the three years I owned and rebuilt a fifty-foot sailboat.
- John and Connie's trip through a submarine in *Wait Until Dark* is based on three different submarines I've toured over the years. There is an amazing website that I'll talk about more when we get to that book.
- And Tim's beach cottage in *Take Over at Midnight* is based on our family summer vacations to Cape Cod. I may have moved it to the Maryland coast, but I knew the cottage well.

I also wrote what I knew with emotions. One of the most memorable for me was Frank Adams' distress in *Frank's Independence Day* when he couldn't get to Africa to help Secret Service Agent Beatrice Belfour. I lifted that emotional sense of utter helplessness from when my then sixteen year old step-daughter used her own money to take herself to volunteer at a Kenyan orphanage for a month. She was fine, but her parents were a wreck the entire time.

RESEARCH

Research for most writers is a constant task when writing something as complex or outside the personal experiences of the writer as this series was for me. The web is, of course, a godsend. Need pictures of a World Heritage site in Cambodia? There are hundreds that I reviewed for *Peter's Christmas*. Need a unique location in the Iranian Desert? Google Maps was an essential tool in developing *Take Over at Midnight*.

The books that librarians have tracked down for me have been nothing short of fabulous. Helicopters, Night Stalkers, aerial fire fighting for a new series I'll discuss at the end of all this... The usefulness of that resource of amazing men and women

cannot be sufficiently praised, and that's not even counting the constant flow of assistance from my librarian wife.

There is a magazine for everything, and many of them are free. I still read every issue that comes in of *Defence Helicopter*, *Rotorhub*, and *Unmanned Vehicles* as soon as it arrives. I've also read many issues of *Guns & Ammo* magazine as well as several others. There are dozens more that I'd like to read, but I need to spend time writing. I also do like to see my family on occasion.

Research on-line or in books and magazines can be serendipitous as I mentioned before. But nothing can beat the people. Two events in particular come to mind other than the personal interviews with the female Black Hawk crew chief that I'll return to in more detail with Connie's story in *Wait Until Dark* and the Coast Guard rescue pilot that I mentioned earlier.

The first was walking into a gun shop whose on-line ads included a fair number of ads for semi-automatic rifles. These weapons are often just a small step down from military-grade equipment and I figured that they would be a good resource.

Again, a setting. Me, a short guy in corporate clothes, though I left the tie and jacket in the car, who has never served in the military, goes into a gun shop. I had shot a twenty-two at summer camp, I wasn't very good. And I had a friend who took me out range-shooting once or twice in college, I wasn't all that much better then.

So, our geek, me, walks into this very clean steel-and-glass shop behind heavy iron grating over the windows. Confronted by a dizzying array of rifles and handguns, he turns to face the people sitting there. Two grizzled warrior-types from perhaps Vietnam-era conflicts. Two guys who quickly made it clear they'd served in Desert Storm. And the "young buck" owner who clearly pumped a lot of iron as revealed by his tight black t-shirt. He also wore two Glocks in crossed shoulder harnesses, something small and nasty-looking at the small of his back, a long knife in a leather sheath strapped to his pants leg, and I

never saw what was in the ankle holster beyond a lump near his pant cuff.

Yes, he kept the chambers loaded. Yes, he liked the Glocks because there was no safety. “My trigger finger is my safety. If it’s not on the trigger, then it’s safe. If it is on the trigger, I absolutely plan on firing it and I don’t want a switch in my way.”

The final piece of the setting was that the “young buck” owner spent the entire two hours I was there, cradling his two-week old first-born daughter with a tenderness all out of proportion with every other aspect of his demeanor. Except for a quick feeding break, his wife, with some smaller weapon holstered on her hip, relaxed comfortably on a couch, but had little chance to hold her daughter. Her smile for her husband was enormous.

Once over the initial shock of what unparalleled gall I was demonstrating in writing about the military, these guys and gal were great. There were many times over the next year that I wish I’d brought a tape recorder or video camera rather than a notepad. We discussed what a Night Stalker might carry and why, and what difference a helicopter might make in what they choose to carry. We discussed what would make a military shooter stand out from a civilian one. Sniper rifles become another topic of their own. They piled me down with back issues of several magazines, carefully finding and folding down corners on particular night-vision gear, knives, watches, relevant ads, and articles.

However, there was one event that was even more helpful for me in my education about weaponry and the military.

A group called the Second Amendment Foundation (SAF) had come up with a solution for the irritation that gun owners have with the gross misuse of weapons in popular fiction—pistols that never run out of ammunition, small women firing massive weapons that don’t even change the angle of their wrist when they should actually knock them on their butts, and so on.

The SAF’s rather unique answer? Round up twenty fiction writers a year for five years in a row and give them a free lesson.

The only cost of the two-and-a-half day class was the flight to and from Las Vegas. They covered everything else: class fees, hotel, and meals. They were that sick of how poorly guns and combat were represented in fiction and had set out to do something about it.

They lectured for a day-and-a-half, then sent us out on the range with a variety of weapons for a day. They offered the course, *Firearms & Fiction*, only five times and I was fortunate enough to be in their final class.

We received lectures on home protection and the proper naming of weapons and their elements (e.g. a bullet is what shoots out of a cartridge). We had the head of the Las Vegas crime scene forensics labs come in and tell us about the real world and what they all loved and hated about the *CSI* television shows. “Tueller’s Law” was actively demonstrated: the fact that it is possible to charge twenty-one feet and tackle someone faster than they can draw a holstered weapon and fire. (I mentioned this one to a friend who had been a former Marine Corps military police. He cursed. He said he’d only been taken down twice in all his years as an MP, both times by drunken Marines, and now he finally knew why.)

We also went to the range and shot everything from a tiny midnight special no bigger than the palm of my hand to Uzis, M-16s, and AK-47s. We even fired a Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifle which is four feet, thirty pounds, and \$9,000 of nasty. This type of weapon holds several long-distance sniper kill records in the mile-and-a-half range. We also were trained in shotgun usage by two-time National Champion and three-time World Champion skeet shooter Shari LeGate. I can tell you that a \$12,000 custom-built shotgun shoots significantly differently from a run of the mill weapon; even this amateur could feel it—though I missed the skeet with both weapons.

We were then run through a “shoot house” scenario where, armed with non-lethal Simunitions and wearing layers of protective gear, we had to run a one-person hostage rescue

situation in a four-room plywood “house” set up on the range. A twenty-to-thirty second event in ten minutes of preparation and five more in debriefing was just a taste of the hundreds, even thousands of hours of training that the military personnel experience. Despite the brevity, this exercise brought out varied and intense reactions among the writers from freezes, to terror followed by storms of tears, to some of us discovering we were *runner-inners*—people who run into the fray with little or no hesitation when there’s a crisis. It turns out I’m a conscious analytical version of the latter.

I suspect that most of combat military, therefore absolutely including Special Forces, is built of *runner-inners*. Civilians, I was told, tend to be *unconscious runner-inners*—they find themselves deeply involved in the scenario and may not even recall how they got there. The military have been trained to be very conscious of their actions.

I have used that experience and the reactions of my classmates more times in my books than perhaps any other single piece of research over the last seven years. There’s an article about it here if you’re interested: <http://www.gunweek.com/2006/feature1210.html>. I’m the guy in the second picture in the white t-shirt taking notes. I hope they bring the course back again someday, it was amazing.

SERIES CONNECTION AND REAL TIME

Two last things before we plunge into the books themselves.

There are three primary ways to build a series: sequential, stand-alones, or related.

In a sequential series, reading out of order is almost impossible. There are many examples of this: Tolkien’s “Lord of the Rings” trilogy, Robert Jordan’s “Wheel of Time,” George R.R. Martin’s “A Song of Fire and Ice” series, Stephen King’s “The Dark Tower.” Each book relies on you having read, and remembering, the prior one. This can be an arduous task as many of these series are written and released across a span of decades.

There are also *stand-alone* or nearly stand-alone series. The most prominent one at the moment in my reading pile is Lee Childs' series starring Jack Reacher. Childs doesn't even name it as a series. The order to the books is of little to no importance. There are small reader cookies (treats for the series reader) that pop up if they're read in order, but the stories can be read individually with almost no loss.

In the *related series*, each book in the series builds on the prior one, but can be read out of order. James Patterson's "Alex Cross" series is structured this way. Each book can be read alone, but if read in order, we can see Alex and his children grow and evolve. This type of series is especially common in romance. Nora Roberts writes of four brothers or three sisters who each have a book of finding true love. Yes, there's an order, but yes, each one is charming in and of itself.

I so enjoy reading this type of *related series* that I set out to make my own romance series follow the same pattern. But there's also the question of time.

Some stories span decades or even eons. Therefore the books' time frame is far longer than the actual writing of the book. There are others where the stories may even overlap, though the books are released separately. Those books' time frame is shorter than the actual release of the books—George Martin has two books that almost fully overlap in time, they simply happen in different locations in his many-taloned kingdoms.

Some books are written at the same pace as the characters' lives occur. In Nora Roberts' "Bride Quartet" series, the books were released every six months and the characters and the seasons evolved approximately six months each time. Their fictional lives occurred in "real time."

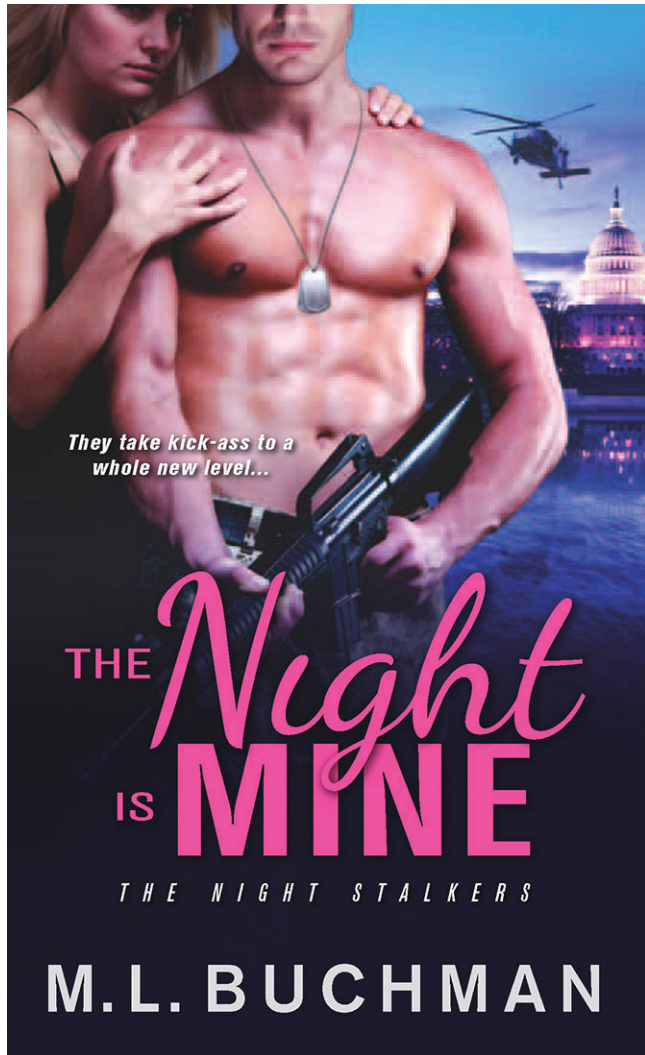
Personally, I enjoy "real time" for my own reading and so that's how I set out to write the "Night Stalkers." Problems occur when there are late releases and schedule changes after the book is written, but I'll talk about those challenges as well; *Peter's Christmas* story was deeply affected by this as it was being

written. But I always strive to have my world keep evolving at the same rate as the calendar pages turn out here in our world.

THE SERIES SO FAR

A quick overview in “to read” order. Which is the same as publication order except for the short story (#5) which occurs in the middle of *Wait Until Dark*, while Connie is traveling to John’s farm but the story wasn’t released until Christmas time.

1. *The Night Is Mine* (novel)
– Emily and Mark, Feb 2012
2. *I Own the Dawn* (novel)
– Kee and Archie, Aug 2012
3. *Daniel’s Christmas* (novella)
– Daniel and Alice, Nov 2012
4. *Wait Until Dark* (novel)
– Connie and Big John, Feb 2013
5. *The Ghost of Willow’s Past* (short story)
– Dusty and Amelia, included in this volume, first sale Oct 2013
6. *Frank’s Independence Day* (novella)
– Frank and Beatrice, May 2013
7. *Peter’s Christmas* (novella)
– Peter and Geneviève, Oct 2013
8. *Take Over at Midnight* (novel)
– Lola and Tim, Dec 2013



They take kick-ass to a whole new level...

THE *Night* IS MINE

THE NIGHT STALKERS

M.L. BUCHMAN