Syracuse Veterans’ Writing Group
August 2012 Writing Prompts

Turning Maps into Scenes

1) Make a map of a place associated with your military experience—this can be an interior or exterior place such as your barracks or CHU, of a place/position in the field or in a vehicle, plane, or ship, or a place you frequented when you were trying to unwind and escape the cares and pressures of military service. Draw a literal map of this place. Don’t worry about being artistic, just note the basics of the place, then go back in and fill in little details as you remember them. If this is an interior space, note doors, windows, furniture. If this is an exterior space, note the physical features of the landscape: grass, trees, rocks, water, etc. Locate yourself on the map with an x or some other kind of drawing. Where were others around you? What objects were around you or with you?

Next, tell us a story from your map. “One day back in _____ (place on your map)” and you are off and running. Don’t edit, don’t worry if you finish. Just go until you can’t anymore. Feel free to use details you noticed from your map.


2) Five questions: What was that like?
Prompt: "What was that like?" (borrowed and modified from the book, _Now Write!,_ edited by Sherry Ellis)
(original prompt written by Madeleine Blais)

Writer Madeleine Blais recalls how after her father died, there were "questions that strangers... felt entitled to ask me all during my childhood"--questions that filled her "with a rush of ambiguity and confusion." Usually, these questions attempted to probe at the source of Blais’s experience. People wanted to know "what it was like" for her as a young child to experience the death of a parent and the aftermath of that death. Examples of some of these questions included: How old were you? Do you remember him? Did your mother remarry? Why not? Blais learned to construct one-word answers to these questions: "five," "maybe," "no," and "ask her." These short responses helped her to avoid the uncomfortable feelings that the questions produced. Later in life, however, she returned to these same questions and wrote a 264-page memoir about her life, based on these same questions.

This prompt is designed to help you tap into similar points of discomfort around commonly asked questions that have both one-word answers and much longer, complicated answers.
Make a list of five questions you are commonly asked about your military service that have both a short answer and a long one. If you'd like, you can begin your questions with the phrase, "What was it like...?" Write out the short answers, and then take some time to respond to one or more of these questions with a long answer. Talk about why the question is uncomfortable for you. How frequently have you been asked this question, and has your short-answer response changed over time? Is it a common question that many vets get asked, or is the question unique to you for some reason? What feelings of ambiguity or confusion does the question raise for you, and where do you sit now with your response and feelings about the question itself?