

## **The First Two Pages: *Blame the Dead* by Ed Ruggero (Forge Books)**

An Essay by Ed Ruggero

My brother, when recommending a book, will sometimes say, “You have to give it a hundred pages to really get going.” Nonsense. I could be dead by then. Or, less dramatically, there are lots of books that grab the reader at the outset. As an author, that’s the response I’m shooting for; I want to write something so compelling the reader cannot possibly do anything but turn the page. It doesn’t always work out, but I know what the goal is.

With *Blame the Dead*, I had a very strong sense of the protagonist, Eddie Harkins, and I wanted to convey that to the reader. He was interesting enough to keep me engaged over the few years I worked on this book; if I could make him equally intriguing to the audience—and do that right out of the gate—I might just get that reader hooked.

Eddie Harkins is a lot of things: citizen-soldier, dedicated law man, loyal brother-in-arms; but if you met him in real life his irreverent—and, I hope, funny—side would come across right away. He’s a smart-ass. We get a picture of Eddie with the first two sentences he utters, the first words in the book.

“We got a waver,” Lieutenant Eddie Harkins said when he spotted the GI up ahead. A soldier was flagging them with both arms, right near a dirt-road turn-off marked with a hand-lettered sign saying “11<sup>th</sup> FIELD HOSP.”

“Two hands. Must be more than one bed pan missing.”

While Eddie Harkins' character is central to the story, the setting is equally important. People read fiction, in part, to travel to unfamiliar places. My job was to paint a vivid picture—not through description alone, the mere piling on of adjectives—but in the pacing, the sentence structure, and the choice of facts I shared.

For example, the landscape these men inhabit is an absolute mess. As I imagined the men riding in their jeep—and I've been to Sicily a number of times—I thought about the sensory overload they would have faced. The prose had to have that same impact, had to make the reader *feel* overwhelmed. I piled on the verbs and descriptors, trying always for the surprising and even startling image.

Since the invasion began on July 10, over a hundred thousand GIs and British Tommies had poured ashore, engulfing first the southern and then the western end of the island, overwhelming the roads until nothing could move, drinking the wells dry, looting stores of wine, driving up prices of everything from whores to fresh food, leaving the detritus of battle covering the sun-scorched landscape. Every roadside was littered with discarded ration cans and cigarette packs, fire-blackened German and Italian war equipment, bloody bandages, used condoms, splintered furniture, filthy clothing, dead burros, and the occasional unburied enemy soldier, bloated and black and stripped of his shoes.

Looking back at the first pages of *Blame the Dead*, I saw that the body—the murder victim in this mystery-thriller—doesn't appear until page three. That was a deliberate choice, obviously, but one that carries a risk. Some readers might not be that patient.

I tried a different approach in *Comes the War*, which will be the next book in this series when it's released next year. The body pops up in the book's second sentence.

There was a white-helmeted American Military Policeman at the alley entrance when First Lieutenant Eddie Harkins got out of the staff car. He could see the body about thirty feet in, lying next to some rubbish cans; but there was no crowd, not a single curious on-looker, dead bodies having become all too common in bomb-smashed London.

There's no guarantee about either choice, and about the only thing that can be said for sure is that this dilemma is one of those issues that writers and readers love debating, love examining from different angles. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but, that, my friends, is what keeps reading—and writing—interesting.

#

Ed Ruggero is a West Point graduate and former Army officer who has studied, practiced, and taught leadership for more than twenty-five years. His client list includes the FBI, the New York City Police Department, CEO Conference Europe, the CIA, the Young Presidents Organization, Forbes, among many others. He has appeared on CNN, The History Channel, the Discovery Channel, and CNBC and has spoken to audiences around the world on leadership, leader development, and ethics. He lives in Philadelphia.