



Interview With Jeff Edwards

Editor's Note: W.H. McDonald Jr., who is President of the Military Writers Society of America, conducted the following interview with Military.Com columnist Jeff Edwards.

Retired Navy Chief Petty Officer Jeff Edwards is the author of *'Torpedo.'* A born storyteller and a veteran submarine hunter, he might just be the hottest thing to happen to naval fiction in twenty years.

After several long-distance phone conversations, and an extensive email correspondence, I finally got to meet Jeff a few months ago when he flew to Sacramento for an awards ceremony at the American Author's Association Book Fair. As the President of Military Writers Society of America, it was my privilege to present him with the *'2005 Admiral Nimitz Award for Outstanding Naval Fiction.'*

I am pleased and honored to have this opportunity to interview him for Military.Com.

Military Writers Society of America: What made you decide to write *'Torpedo'*?

Jeff Edwards: (Grins.) Wow! You're going to put me on the spot right away... My first novel was sort of a high-tech murder mystery. It was a cross-genre piece that somebody once described as *'Blade Runner on crack.'* There was a lot of technology built in to the story, and my agent saw that and decided that I should put my Navy experience to work. He asked me to write a military thriller. I wasn't crazy about the idea. I was still on active duty then, and I was too close to the military to want to write about it. I really didn't think I'd enjoy it, and I didn't think I'd be any good at it.

MWSA: But you *did* write about it.

EDWARDS: Yes, I did. My agent asked me to give it one honest attempt — Just ten pages. Then, if I wasn't having fun, I could toss the whole thing in the trash and go work on something more appealing.

About Jeff Edwards:



Jeff Edwards is a retired U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer, a Naval Warfare Specialist, and an award-winning novelist. He is currently working as a civilian expert consultant to the Naval Mine and Anti-Submarine Warfare Command, the Navy's think tank for high-tech undersea warfare.

His naval career spanned more than two decades and half the globe—from chasing Soviet nuclear attack submarines during the Cold War, to launching cruise missiles in the Persian Gulf.

His first novel, **TORPEDO** won the 2005 Admiral Nimitz Award for Outstanding Naval Fiction, and the 2005 American Author Medal.

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MWSA: What happened?

EDWARDS: I put it off for as long as I could. Then my ship pulled into Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, and I found myself with an entire weekend off. I was planning to go out sightseeing, but I decided to sit down with my laptop and bang out ten quick pages to make my agent happy. After what seemed like a few hours, I left my laptop and went to look for something to eat. I'd worked all the way through the night without realizing it. I had fallen in love with the story, and I had fallen in love with writing about the Navy. That was quite a surprise. I really hadn't expected to like it.

MWSA: That was the manuscript that became *Torpedo*?

EDWARDS: Yeah. The book went through several name changes, but the story stayed pretty constant.

MWSA: How much of *Torpedo* is autobiographical?

EDWARDS: That's not an easy question to answer. There's a bit of me in a lot of the characters, but there's no one in the book who directly represents Jeff Edwards. On the other hand, some of the little adventures that are woven into the story are based on actual experiences.

MWSA: You spent the better part of two and a half decades hunting submarines in real life. How accurate are the military hardware and combat tactics in *Torpedo*?

EDWARDS: They're as accurate as I could make them without revealing classified material. Sometimes that meant changing my descriptions of tactics or equipment. When I made those changes, I tried hard to maintain the flavor of the real thing, even when details had to be omitted or adjusted. I was still on active duty when I wrote the early drafts of *Torpedo*, so I had to get permission from the Navy, the Department of Defense, and the State Department to publish the book. They went over it with the proverbial fine-toothed comb, to make sure I hadn't accidentally revealed anything classified.

MWSA: You're retired now, so you won't have to ask permission to publish the next one. Is it going to be a relief to be able to bypass that bureaucracy?

EDWARDS: Actually, I'm not planning to bypass it. When my next military thriller is ready, I'm going to submit it through the same channels.

MWSA: Even though you don't have to?

EDWARDS: Even though I don't have to. This isn't just about covering my back. There's something more important at stake here. My number one priority is to do nothing that could endanger our national defense. I work very hard to keep classified material out of my writing, but it never hurts to have someone knowledgeable go through and double check for anything that



might have slipped past me. It's well worth dealing with a little red tape to maintain military security.

MWSA: Where did you get the storytelling gift?

EDWARDS: I've always attributed it to my father. When I was young, he would tell me incredible stories about a talking bear named Oliver, who drank chocolate milk. Over the past couple of years, I've begun to realize that I also probably get a lot of it from my mother and my sister, both of whom are wonderful storytellers. Come to think of it, my brothers can both spin a pretty fair yarn too. I guess my whole family has the gene, or the gift, or whatever it is.

MWSA: Several bestselling authors, including Homer Hickam, have compared you to Tom Clancy. Do you think that sort of comparison is inevitable?

EDWARDS: I think it *is* inevitable. (Smiles.) Not because I'm actually in the same ballpark with the man, but because anyone who writes military fiction with a strong technical component is going to wind up being compared to Clancy. Sooner or later, every martial artist gets compared to Bruce Lee. It's the nature of the game.

MWSA: How do you feel about having it happen to you?

EDWARDS: (Laughs.) The real question is; how does Tom Clancy feel about it? Of course, I'm delighted. How could I not be flattered by any comparison to the master of the genre?

MWSA: What the strangest thing that's happened to you since you started writing?

EDWARDS: Hmm... (Pauses for several seconds before speaking.) The Naval Institute Press sent me a rejection letter for a novel called '*Ice Fire*.'

MWSA: What's so strange about that? A lot of writers get rejection letters.

EDWARDS: Of course they do. I've gotten my fair of rejection letters. But I didn't write *Ice Fire*. I have no idea who *did* write it. Some poor writer somewhere is still waiting to hear what the Naval Institute thinks of his book.

MWSA: I saw in the '*Hollywood Reporter*' that *Torpedo* has been optioned by a major movie producer. How much can you tell us about the movie deal?

EDWARDS: Not much. I don't think I'm allowed to discuss details right now. I'll just say that it's an honor to be dealing with a producer of Paul Sandberg's caliber. Some very smart people think *Torpedo* would make a good movie, and that's flattering. I don't think I'd be willing to comment beyond that.

MWSA: Who should play Captain Bowie in the film?



EDWARDS: (Grins.) No Comment.

MWSA: You have an opinion on the matter?

EDWARDS: Of course I have an opinion. I'm just not going to share it. If things get that far, I'm just as interested to see who's going to play Captain Rachel Vargas, and Chief Theresa McPherson. They're both strong female roles, warriors from the ground up.

MWSA: Do you have any plans for your next novel?

EDWARDS: Certainly. I'm neck-deep in the first draft of a new book.

MWSA: Is it a USS *Towers* story?

EDWARDS: The *Towers* will definitely factor into the plot. And some of the characters from *Torpedo* will be back.

MWSA: Is that all you're going to tell us? Can you at least give us a hint?

EDWARDS: There are several hints buried in *Torpedo*. That's all I'm going to say, for now.

MWSA: One final question... What advice can you offer to people who are trying to break into writing?

EDWARDS: If that's your dream, don't let anyone talk you out of it. A thousand people, many of them writers or publishing insiders, will hammer you with horror stories about how tough it is to get anywhere in the writing business. Tune them out. Every bestselling author started out as an unpublished wannabe, listening to the same gloomy predictions. Every one who made it did so by ignoring the voices of doom and following the dream.

For more columns by Jeff Edwards, visit NavyThriller.Com.