

Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Jack Campbell (March 2020)

Jack Campbell writes modern space opera, science fiction, military science fiction and fantasy.

Campbell is a pen name for John G. Hemry who is a retired U.S. Navy officer and 1978 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. His experience in the U.S Navy informs his best-selling science fiction novels and stories. He has written more than 19 novels as well as three anthologies of short stories.

His best known series is The Lost Fleet Series.

Jerry Peck: Does he have any plans to continue additional story arcs in The Lost Fleet universe, similar to the Genesis Fleet?"

Yes, I do. For now, the next trilogy (which I'm working on now) is a continuation of the story from the end of Leviathan. The trilogy is called The Lost Fleet - Outlands. It will follow the events at the Alliance capital, and then in space as the Alliance attempts to establish closer contact with the alien Dancers. But that means crossing Syndicate Worlds space, as well as space controlled by the enigma race. And anti-Dancer sentiments are on the rise based on their appearance, further complicating and endangering the mission. I just finished the first book in the Outlands trilogy (Boundless).

Heather Prince: Are your Lost Fleet and Pillars of Reality series connected? If so, did you always mean for them to be or did you decide as you went?

They were conceived independently of each other. A lot of readers (as well as at least one publisher) would like the two universes to be connected, but I face some minor problems and one big problem with doing that. The big problem is that there are no Mages in the Lost Fleet universe. I'd have to come up with a reason why the Mages ceased to exist and their arts no longer could be used. Why, in fact, no one in the Lost Fleet has ever talked about them as even a legend of the past. Whatever happened would inevitably be tragic at least as far as the Mages are concerned. There's always the chance that I'll figure out some good way to eliminate the Mages and common knowledge of them outside of the world of Dematr, but right now I don't have one. There are some other inconsistencies between the two universes that I'd have to address, but that's the big one.

Erik Wilkenfeldt: Hi John, Love your books! are you more of a Aubrey-Maturin fan, or a Horatio Hornblower fan? and did you get any inspiration from either of those series?

I think I lean more toward Hornblower, though that's probably because of earlier and longer exposure to that series. Both are very good. One thing I particularly liked about Hornblower was that as the series followed his rise in rank, it didn't shy from the reality that at a certain point Hornblower could no longer be the person going on the dangerous missions but had to be the one sending someone else. Both series also focus very much on how sailors do their work, which I think is important. Those things not only give a sense of reality to the story, they also define the capabilities and limitations of their ships and skills. I think that's incredibly important. A good book about sailing ships reflects the critical nature of the wind and its fickleness, as well as the characteristics of the ocean. Too often, books about space don't deal with space itself. That's easier, but it leaves out really important elements of the story.

Molly Greenspring: How easy it is to apply current military practices to what may happen to the military in the future with new technologies and events?

There are two parts to that question, I think. In the sense of military practices as a culture, I think some things carry over throughout history. If you brought an Imperial Roman Centurion and a modern day Marine Gunnery Sergeant together they'd probably find they had a lot in common, complaining about clueless junior officers, how recruits these days don't measure up to what they used to be, and where to find the best bars in different places. Certain aspects of military culture seem to endure across history. (Which isn't to say that significant differences also occur, for example in the amount of brutality allowed against junior personnel, which has sometimes been horrific.) And when it comes to new technology, a certain rule still applies - you can make it break proof, but you can't make it sailor proof. At the same time, while finding new and extreme ways to test the endurance of equipment, military personnel are also likely to discover new ways to use it and improve it, improvising new capabilities. Which leads to another constant, I believe, that if an officer looks after their personnel, those personnel will look after their officer and find ways to get the job done.

When it comes to things like command authority, there's also a consistency across history that commanding officers have been given a tremendous amount of authority over those under their command. Needless to say, that gets abused. But at the same time, the demands of military service, the demands of combat, seem to make it a universal requirement

Beyond that, though, is the question of military tactics and strategies. Those should always change to reflect new technologies, but often don't until forced to or an inspired commander comes along. During the Hundred Years War, the French persisted in set piece attacks against prepared English positions, and kept getting badly defeated. That didn't change until Joan of Arc led the French at Patay and advised them to use their spurs, resulting in an attack that hit the unprepared English and resulted in a big French victory. The British Royal Navy tried to dictate the actions of its admirals with what were called the Sailing Instructions, which indeed laid out exactly how a battle was to be fought. Great commanders like Nelson ignored the Instructions and won great victories (but within a decade of Nelson's death the Sailing Instructions were back). In the American Civil War, commanders kept throwing masses of infantry against defenders, resulting in horrible losses at such battles as Malvern Hill and Pickett's charge. Grant only did that once, at Cold Harbor, and never again. Lee (and others) kept doing it over and over again. Before World War One, European military leaders chose to ignore the lessons of the American Civil War, resulting in hideous losses again and again as infantry was hurled at entrenched defenders.

At the same time, militaries often rush to discard hard-won lessons as soon as they can. The lesson of World War One that convoys were essential to overcome the threat of submarines was initially ignored in World War Two by the British, and then by the American Navy, resulting in awful losses of shipping. (Convoys were seen as defensive and nobody wanted to champion being on the defense instead of the attack.) The junior officers in the American Army who learned about counter-insurgency in Vietnam were leading the Army by the time the US invaded Iraq, and failed to apply the lessons they'd learned when they were lieutenants.

Sadly, what that and many other historical examples mean is that new technological developments will probably not be adapted to until after lessons paid for in blood, and even then may well be discarded as soon as possible. In the military, practical experience may take a very long time to impact doctrine. For

example, despite the fact that airpower has never on its own won a war, the US Air Force continues to follow a doctrine that air power alone is decisive. (It's very important, but hardly the only element that matters.) And new technology can lead to mistaken changes. After the atomic bomb was introduced, there were arguments that armies and navies had become obsolete. When guided missiles were introduced after World War Two, guns were left off of new ship and aircraft designs. In both cases, it turned out that the weapons that had "changed everything" had in fact left a lot of the same problems that required a lot of the same solutions.

One of the technological issues we are facing now is that instant communications and computerized systems are allowing more and more micromanagement of everyone. How does a junior officer learn to lead if a senior officer is always on his or her shoulder giving exact orders on what to do? (During one conflict a few years ago Israeli soldiers referred disdainfully to "plasma officers" who were trying to direct everything from the rear while looking at plasma displays.)

Summing up, I think history offers a guide (and a discouraging one) about how future militaries will adapt to change, but also inspiration that good leaders can bring about needed change. And try as it might technology doesn't alter some fundamentals of military culture which are based on the unique demands put on the military.

Molly Greenspring: What are your views on there being a space department of the military and what do you think the future of this may be?

I think at this point it's premature. The "space" aspect of modern militaries is all focused on the surface of the planet, or on devices in orbit that are focused on the surface of the planet. Space war would simply be a direct extension of war on the surface of the planet and in its skies. Separating out space will, I think, create problems with people losing sight of that basic reality and instead trying to focus on space as if it was somehow a disconnected environment during conflicts rather than being tightly connected to actions on the planet.

There's also the problem that "space" isn't the same all over. Near Earth orbit (which is where the vast majority of space-related activity still occurs) is a different "place" than deep space. Spacecraft in orbit are close enough to seek refuge on the surface if something goes wrong. Orbital dynamics are different than deep space travel. Designs optimized for near Earth activity won't be suitable for deep space. There's a reason the Coast Guard and the Navy have remained separate services for more than two centuries despite both operating on the water. The things they do, and where they do them, often aren't the same. Using that as an analogy for space, I would think an aerospace force built along air force lines would make sense for orbital activity, but a "naval" space force using naval models for self-sufficiency and long term operations far from home would be more appropriate for deep space missions.

Martin Healey: Any more of the JAG series possible.

Possible, yes. Unfortunately, Paul Sinclair has refused to tell me the next story. If he does, I'll write it, but he's been quiet for some time. So I don't know if or when that'll happen. (I did write a novella called Failure to Obey which takes place after Paul has left for Mars, because Jen and the Sheriff had a few things to say, but nothing has come to me since then.)

Martin Healey: Your fleets compared to others seem so much more real with a train of support/supply. How do you think three dimensions maneuvers could be coordinated over such a large distance

I tried to show the difficulties in the Lost Fleet universe books. To some extent, tactics and strategies always have to reflect how long it takes to communicate and how long it take any unit to move from point a to point b. Ancient campaigns often turned on whether different forces successfully linked up at the right times, or one was delayed, or one rushed ahead. Space will bring us back to that sort of problem, where both communications and plans require taking into account how long it takes for everything. Of course, space also offers some unique aspects, such as the ability to see such immense distances. On the one hand, that lets a commander see where the enemy was. On the other hand, the commander is seeing where they were and what they were doing hours ago. So every maneuver has to take into account the time-late nature of information as well as how long it will take anyone to react to what they eventually see. Which means a lot of estimations (aka guesswork) based on what ships are expected to do. Some people will be brilliant at this, I think, as is the case with every skill set, and others will have to learn by a lot of practice. But in the end it all comes down to relative motion, and that's something most people can grasp. It's what drivers do when watching the cars around them, estimating where they're going and where they'll be, and it's what ship drivers do when ships are maneuvering around each other. Space makes it more complicated, but it's still the same idea.

Neville Christensen: Will you be returning to the Lost Stars series? Would really like to learn more about the various alien races you introduced.

I'm not directly returning to Lost Stars, but the new Lost Fleet trilogy will have a lot of interconnections with it. Geary will have to return to Midway to deal with Icenis and Drakon, and they in turn will have to make some decisions about how much to trust the Alliance. The alien races will be a main focus of the story line for the trilogy as the Lost Fleet narrative evolves to reflect the events in prior books.

Ita Barbara: Why did you change to writing fantasy? Were you tired of writing mil-SF or just wanted to stretch your writerly wings?

I didn't really change. The Dragons of Dorcastle was the first book I wrote, inspired by my experiences with different people and cultures. How someone views the world has a great deal to do with what questions they ask and what answers they're willing to accept. Being my first book, though, it had a lot of problems, and I set it aside while working on the different SF series. That first version of Dragons had basic elements in common with what was eventually published, but needed a lot of work. After enough experience with writing over the next ten years or so I could figure out what needed to be done, and so did it, rewriting Dragons and then following on with the other books.

A strange thing about the stories set on Dematr, though, is that the characters demand to be written. I admit to a special fondness for Mari and Alain, who wanted their story told. But once I'd finished the sixth book in the Pillars of Reality series, and was ready to move on, Kira showed up and insisted I write her story. So, I had to do that. And then set that universe aside again so I could work on other projects. Except that Jules the legendary pirate then showed up and demanded I write her story, which turned into the Empress of the Endless Sea trilogy (all of which came out as audiobooks on 26 March). In a real sense, I've been writing those books because the characters didn't give me any choice. They've been very insistent. What writers call the Muse is like that. The Muse won't always cooperate with what you

want to write or expect to write, instead sending you in different directions. I've learned that it's wise to listen to that voice, but really I had to. I couldn't write anything else while they were demanding my attention.

The Pillars of Reality books are what used to be called science fantasy, similar to a lot of what writers like Leigh Brackett wrote, and the mainstay of speculative fiction in the 1940s and 1950s. (In fact, even though publishers today all insist that science fantasy is long dead, it makes up the most popular media in recent years, including both the Star Wars universe and the Marvel Cinematic universe.) I did want to write stories similar to those of masterful writers like Brackett, and that probably also influenced the eventual fixing up and publishing of the books.

John Grayshaw: Why did you decided to publish under a pen name?

It was not so much a decision as a necessity. My first series (Stark's War) sold moderately well. Not great, but okay. The second series (JAG in Space) was actually proposed by the publisher, who then did a horrible job of marketing the books, with the result that sales weren't good. At the time, Borders and Barnes & Noble dominated book selling, and they use software to order books. The software based new orders of a writer's books on how well the last book of theirs had sold. The result was that when one book didn't sell well, subsequent orders were for fewer books, which made the next one sell even worse, and so on. It's what writers call a death spiral. The only way out is to adopt a pen name, which causes the software to see a new writer and order enough copies of the book to give it a chance. Both my agent and my editor said I needed to do that to give the Lost Fleet an opportunity to succeed, and fortunately it worked. (The pen name, by the way, came from my being part-Campbell on my father's side, and from my father and oldest son both being named Jack, so it felt natural.) A number of other writers have had to do the same "relaunch" with a pen name to revive their careers, including Megan Lindholm (Robin Hobb).

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the science fiction writers who inspired you as you discovered the genre?

There were many, as I read a lot. Robert Heinlein, Andre Norton, Poul Anderson, James Schmitz, CJ Cherryh, H. Beam Piper, and Leigh Brackett among many others.

John Grayshaw: Who are some science fiction writers you are friends with? How have these relationships influenced your writing?

I've been fortunate to meet a lot of current writers. Elizabeth Moon, for example. Mike Shepherd/Moscoe. Peter Brett. Sharon Lee and Steve Miller. Tanya Huff. Bob Chase. Carolyn Gilman. We tend to share "war stories" about publishing, share cautionary stories as well, and pass around tips. Writing, as a whole, is a field where most people are happy to try to help newcomers as well as old hands. At conventions, we sit around in the bar and swap ideas and stories. It's tremendously inspiring. I don't think any of these writers have directly influenced how I write in the sense of fundamental changes, though good writers are always learning more about writing and always looking for good examples in the work of others. But they definitely influence how someone feels about the writing community and the things we share.

John Grayshaw: How much does naval history influence the conflict and battles in your books?

As a general rule naval history inspires general concepts. That is, I never think "I'll base this battle on Salamis," or "I'll use the Peloponnesian War as the template for the overall conflict." What I do instead is look at how technology and the sea impacted strategies and tactics at different times, and how those things evolved. My experience in the Navy impressed on me how important the operating environment is, so the first thing I did when thinking about stories set in space was think about what space is like, and how that would affect everything from the nature of the spacecraft to how they were employed.

Space, after all, isn't like anything on a planet. The incredible distances, the lack of limits in any direction, the lack of an up and a down, the limitations of light speed, all combine to produce something very different from that on Earth. So the spacecraft in the Lost Fleet are sort of like ships, and sort of like aircraft, but also not either of those things, being designed for their environment.

Naval history (and military history in general) does infuse the story lines. The conservatism of militaries, the way lessons bought with blood are tossed aside as quickly as possible, the interplay of enlisted and officer ranks, the way different specialties and experience impact the decisions and actions of different people. How the capabilities and limitations of platforms and weapons have to be clearly understood and how they impact what happens. The hardest aspect to work with is the sometimes sheer, stubborn stupidity of real historical military and naval actions, because those without military experience will think those reality-based things are over the top. As the old saying goes, the difference between real life and fiction is that fiction has to be plausible.

The original Lost Fleet narrative came out of a desire to see if I could tell a plausible story of a long retreat in space, drawing on the general story of Xenophon's March of the 10,000. But I combined that with the legends (common around the world) of the sleeping hero who'll return when most needed. I very deliberately did not try to replicate Xenophon's story in space, rather looking at the general situation and how that would work out.

One thing that both history and my own experience led me to do was to make logistics important in the Lost Fleet. In the real world, in history, many military decisions are dictated or heavily influenced by supplies. Food, weapons, fuel. A lot of SF leaves those out, which I think is a serious mistake. It leaves out a critical part of the situation which every commander has to consider in every decision. Time and distance also matter. Being where you need to be when you need to be there is a perpetual challenge in history, and I think it always will be.

John Grayshaw: Is Captain John "Black Jack Geary modeled after a real person or your own creation?

Black Jack is a composite of some of the officers I served under, as well as of certain historical figures. His refusal to consider becoming ruler of the Alliance draws on the example of George Washington, as do his reactions to developments in battles. Washington may not have been a military genius, but he never froze up when things started going badly. He always adapted, so his army always survived. But he also has aspects of officers I served with such as Captain Richard Hayes and Rear Admiral Cathal Flynn.

John Grayshaw: Why is it in the “Lost Fleet” novels that a prolonged war causes the military tactics to get worse instead of better? Did you see examples of this phenomenon in history?

Unfortunately, it does happen. Usually in the form of sticking to something that doesn't work even in the face of repeated failure, and thinking that simply using more will produce better results. World War One, for example. But when losses of trained forces are severe, important experience and skills can be lost along with the people who die. The kamikazes that Japan fell back on in the last part of World War Two are an example of that. Japan had lost too many trained, experienced pilots to contend with American aircraft, so they began simply training pilots to be able to fly well enough to fly into a ship. In the same war, US and British strategic bombing was designed to hit pinpoint targets from the air, destroying industry. But because that proved far less effective than believed (as well as much more dangerous for the bombers) the British (and the US sometimes in Europe and later in Japan) simply started hitting entire cities. We went from surgical strikes to sledgehammers that killed indiscriminately.

In Vietnam, a US counterinsurgency strategy built around concepts like CAP platoons was providing security to individual villages and hamlets, gradually gaining ground. That was classic, proven counter-insurgency. General Westmoreland came in and yanked those forces out of the hamlets so he could send them on big offensive operations. Perhaps the worst example of his tactics was at Khe Sanh, where the concept involved sticking a lot of US Marines on exposed high ground as bait for enemy forces, and then dropping huge numbers of bombs on the surrounding countryside in the hopes of killing the enemy gathered to besiege Khe Sanh. When General Abrams took over he abandoned the large scale sweeps to once again try to defend and secure populated areas, but by then support for the war in the US had collapsed.

Napoleon's campaigns deteriorated over his career. The general who led brilliant maneuvers in his early years increasingly fell back on costly frontal attacks. From Borodino onward to Waterloo, Napoleon demonstrated less and less skill (perhaps because of physical problems) culminating in Waterloo where Wellington could sit back and wait for Napoleon to make enough mistakes.

In ancient Greece, Homer became the template for war, leading to the armies of Greek city states altering their forces to conform to that example. They didn't use siege machines (which weren't in Homer) and they got rid of archers (because merit in battle was determined by whether someone held their place in line when face to face with the enemy, so killing them with a distance weapon robbed a soldier of a chance to prove valor).

And of course sometimes knowledge is simply lost. After Rome fell, Western European warfare pretty much fell back on hack and slash for a long time, and Western Knights placed their honor and desire for valor over such base concepts as tactics.

John Grayshaw: I thought it helped balance the Lost Fleet books that Geary's two main allies/advisors were strong female characters. Was this the intention?

Not entirely. Victoria Rione was always supposed to play a strong role, but to my own surprise Tanya Desjani became more and more a confidant and adviser to Geary. I didn't want them to have a personal relationship, but as characters sometimes do they had other ideas. That required me to figure out how two professionals would deal with it. The core of first Rione and then Desjani as well was that they were

people who could be counted on to tell Geary things he didn't want to hear. I believe the more power someone has, the more important it is that they have at least one person willing and able to speak truth to them regardless of the consequences.

Over time, the relationship of those three kept evolving, and I just tried to keep up. It was one of those cases where something I hadn't planned on was happening, and rather than fight it I let it run to see where it would go. In the end, in Leviathan, I finally saw where Rione's story arc had been leading since the first scene she appeared in.

An important aspect of their relationships was that both Rione and Desjani had grudging respect for each other, but never wanted to admit it. And that both of them wanted Geary to succeed, and were willing to work with the other to make that happen. But of course when two strong personalities meet it produces powerful results as well as conflict.

John Grayshaw: Do you have personal favorites of your work? And why?

The best thing I ever wrote and still a sentimental favorite is the novella Lady Be Good. It's sort of an homage to those old tramp freighter in the south Pacific movies of the 1930s, and also an homage to the marvelous writer Leigh Brackett. Otherwise I am fond of the Lost Fleet, and of the World of Dematr. The characters in those stories feel very real to me, and I want to know what stories they are living.

John Grayshaw: What are your hobbies other than writing?

I've always liked history of all kinds, as well as mythology, so researching and reading about different aspects of those things is always fun. At various times I've done a lot of model building and model railroading, though time for that has diminished.

John Grayshaw: Do you have a writing routine that you stick with?

I try to write every day, but can't always do so. Some days I can write a lot, some days I can barely get a word down. I guess my routine is to be able to jump in and write when the inspiration strikes. Some people can write for a certain number of hours each day at a certain time each day, but that's never worked for me. Sometimes my best "writing" comes while I work on something else like yard work or electrical work or anything else that lets my mind roam. (The basic rule of writing is that there are no universal rules. Everyone is different and what works for them is different. So, aside from making sure you actually write, the key is to try things and, if they work, stick with them, and if they don't work, try other things.)

John Grayshaw: What sort of tools or software do you use to keep the large canvas of the "Lost Fleet" universe straight?

Mostly it's in my head, and in the previous books to be referenced when needed. That is not the most efficient or effective way of doing things. Some writers maintain vast detailed binders of information. But it's what works for me.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

Right now I'm working on the Lost Fleet Outlands trilogy, having just finished the first book (Boundless). After that I need to start book two. And as mentioned above I just had published an entire trilogy set on Dematr.

John Grayshaw: What are your goals for the future?

Try not to repeat myself, try to keep telling good stories, try to keep faith with my readers, try to think of new ideas. Try to never stop. Try to keep seeing the wonders of the universe, and how they can inspire new things and create new possibilities.