

A New Face @

'93 grad's writing catches the attention of one of the biggest names in comic books

M arvel

By Matt Brady, Newsarama.com *(Article was first published by newsarama.com.)*
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Marvel Comics has made no secret of the fact that it's constantly on the hunt for new talent. Given the visual nature involved, the search for new artists usually get the most attention, such as C.B. Cebulski's "Chesterquest," but to those paying attention, new writers are regularly popping up in the credits.

And no, they're not all television or movie writers looking for a second job.

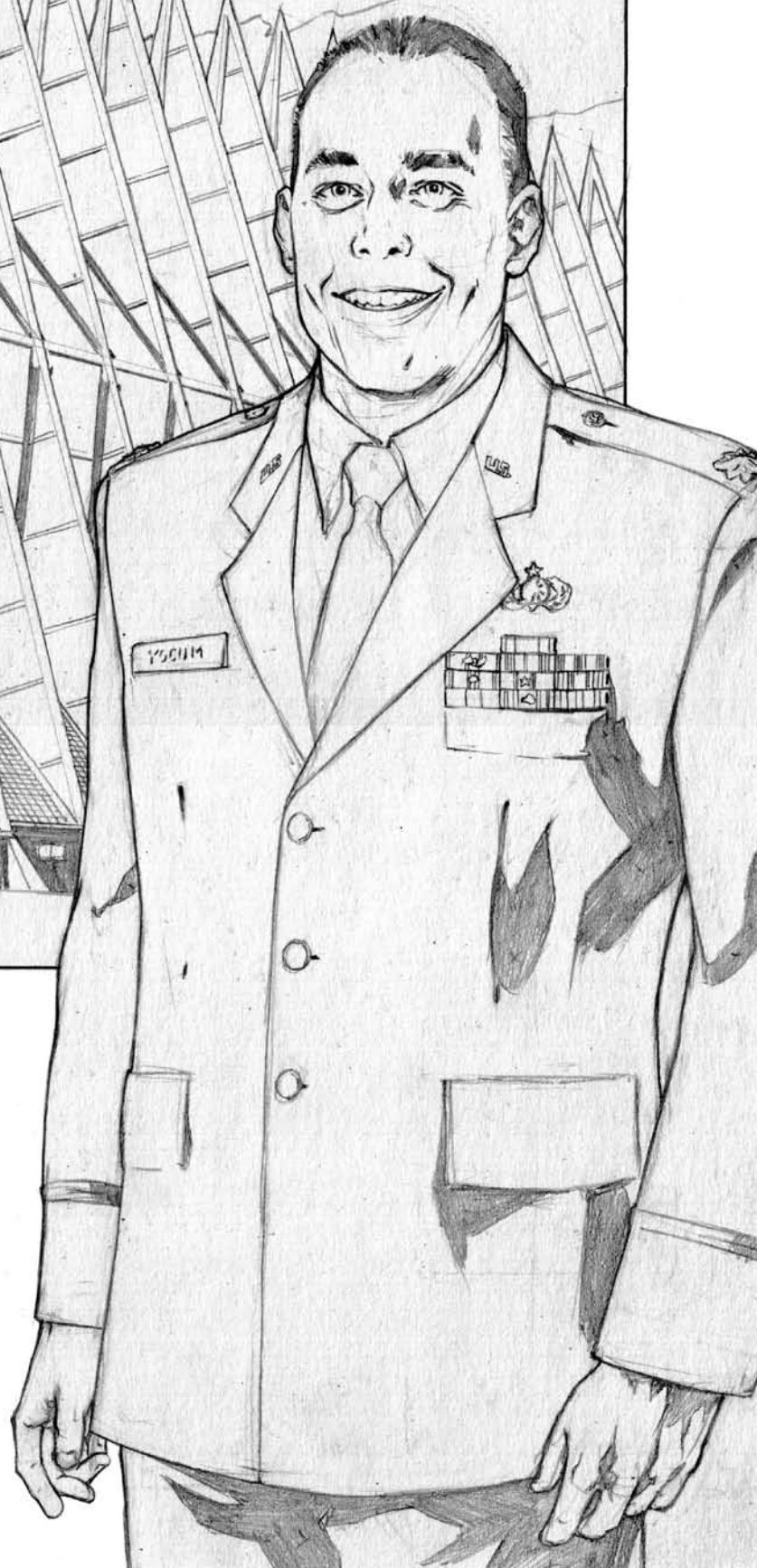
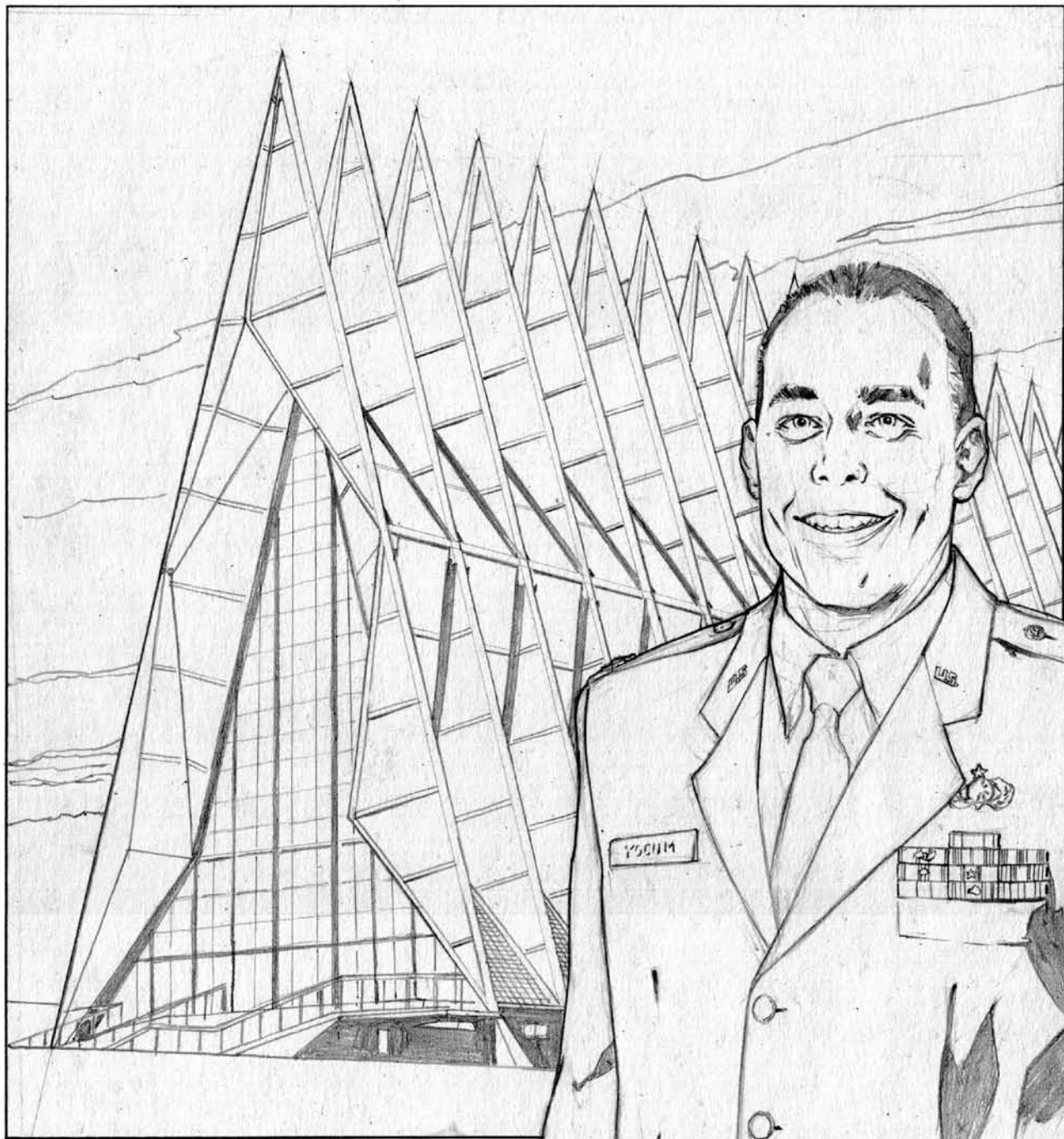
Case in point: December's Giant-Size Avengers Special #1. Along the writers listed, some guy named Matt Yocum. Nope—he's not a producer on *Heroes*, *Lost* or *Battlestar Galactica*—he's just a man with a dream that's been realized. Okay—to be honest, there's a little more to it than that.

We spoke with Yocum about his getting in, and his Spider-Man story.

NEWSARAMA: First off, Matt—how did this project get started? Were you just submitting cold to Marvel?

MATT YOCUM: I was submitting cold, but in a decidedly different way than normal. After having been to a few comic conventions, I saw how many hopeful writers and artists were vying for editors' attention. So I knew I had to figure out a way to stand out, to somehow have a one-on-one experience.

I had read that at Wizard World LA in 2006 there would be an auction from the comics charity ACTOR [now called The Hero Initiative] to have lunch with





Matt Vocum, '93, on a recent visit to the Academy. (Courtesy photo)

Joe Quesada. I decided right then I was going to win that lunch. I set my alarm to wake me up, held off any last minute bidders, and won. At our lunch, we hit it off, and I pitched him some stories. He got back to me that they were interested in one of them, a story I'd intended for the now-defunct Spider-Man Unlimited title. I followed up at another convention where Joe introduced me to editor Tom Brevoort, and after sending the script, I heard back from editor John Barber saying they wanted it. Eventually it found its home in *Giant-Size Avengers Special #1* coming out December 19th.

NRAMA: Now—let's let the readers in on a side note to all of this—you were doing this in addition to your day job, which has its own demands ... you want to fill folks in on what you do when you're not writing comics?

MY: I'm an active duty Air Force major, and right now I'm stationed in the Defense Attaché Office at the US Embassy

in Tel Aviv, Israel. I've been in the Air Force since I was 17, going to the Air Force Academy, and then I became an officer after graduation 14 years ago. In my current duty as an Air Attaché, I have several roles: I represent the Air Force Chief of Staff to the Israeli government and the other embassies (which includes my wife and I going to every country's national and armed forces day ceremonies, among other events), I serve as a military advisor to the US Ambassador, and I report on in-country and regional political-military activities.

It was a bit crazy after I first met Joe. I ended up getting this assignment, and I wanted to catch him one more time before I left, to see if they were still interested. That's when I asked my wife if we could stop by Philly for a Wizard World convention on the way to Israel to follow up with Joe on the story, and needless to say, it worked out.

NRAMA: What got you started on the writing road? Is it just comics that you're interested in, or is there more?

MY: Writing has always been my thing, going back to high school. To be honest, I was set on being a novelist. I've written two novels, neither of which have been sold, but both of which have taught me a tremendous amount about writing. The second book, a conspiracy thriller that takes place at the Air Force Academy, seemed the most promising when I won an editorial award from HarperCollins, secured an agent, and received interest from Tom Clancy's publisher. But at the time the curse of *The DaVinci Code* was such that if you weren't writing thrillers just like it, your book wouldn't be touched.

I've loved comics since I was 10, and eventually I realized my heart belonged to comics, so I moved in that direction. My day job can be pretty busy sometimes, so I have to be selective what I spend my free time on, and right now that writing time is comics.

NRAMA: Speaking specifically about this story—did you come up with the characters, or was your cast suggested to you?

MY: This story was intended for Spider-Man Unlimited, so Spidey was always going to be the central character. But I also wanted to include some other heavy hitters, and I developed a story around Spider-Man's early days in the New Avengers. That led to Captain America and Iron Man's involvement. And thanks to Tony Stark's Illuminati connection, Doctor Strange makes an appearance as well.

NRAMA: Broad strokes - what's the story about?

MY: My story shows that Spider-Man's first foray from solo superhero to team player wasn't as easy a transition as it appeared. Iron Man, as a founder of the Avengers, and Captain America, probably the most recognized Avenger, both realize Peter doesn't quite understand the impact of being an Avenger. They enlist Dr. Strange to help Peter appreciate the heritage and history of the team and that he's part of something much bigger. The story is titled "Memorial Day."

NRAMA: Coming at the comics writing thing totally fresh after being a fan, what surprised you the most about writing a story and seeing it produced?

MY: The biggest surprise writing this story has been the interaction with my artist, Paul Neary. I didn't know how much input I would have, but Paul and I had some great discussions about the story and the intent of various pages and panels. And then there's the moment when I thought I knew what it'd look like, and it comes back even better than anything I imagined.

NRAMA: And this was all cool with your superiors?

MY: It's all in my spare time, so they don't have any problems. My bosses all know that with me, the Air Force comes first. It has to. The day that it doesn't is the day I need to get out. I realized this most when I got stationed here in Israel.

In this country, they have a universal draft, men and women, so they don't have a choice. I *did* have a choice. And it's only fair that if I made that choice, I have to give it top priority. It's too important a job to the people you serve to give it second billing.

NRAMA: So when exactly *do* you have time to write?

MY: Every morning, *early* in the morning (before my wife wakes up), I write for one hour. I learned this "one hour" rule when writing my second novel. Some people suggest writing at least a thousand words a day. That didn't work for me since I never knew how long a thousand words would take. It could take half an hour or four hours, depending on how it's going. But I determined that I would write at least an hour every day, no matter what. If the angels were singing and I wrote two thousand words in that hour, great. And if the wheels weren't turning and I wrote twenty words, great. I still put my hour in. I wrote the first draft of that novel in six months.

I've applied the same rule to comics. At least an hour every day, and if there's more time later in the evening, then that's bonus.

NRAMA: What happens if this leads to bigger things? Do you have time to squeeze more in? Is writing comics something that you're now considering after your gig in the Air Force is up?

MY: You make time for the things you love, and I love comics through and through. I learned at the Academy how to not waste time, and I've always been able to accommodate more—it just means shifting priorities. If I don't get to watch *Heroes* Season 1 on DVD for a few more months (since I didn't get to see it here in Israel), then so be it. Especially if it means writing more for Marvel!

It's most definitely what I want to do, and I'd rather not wait until my military time is up. Right now I'm writing a webcomic for ComicCritique.com, a little

thriller called *Devolution*, with an astounding artist named Jake Bilbao. I continue to contribute to that site, writing columns and doing interviews. And I'm also pitching Marvel several miniseries, hoping they've enjoyed working with me as much as I have them. I've sent them ideas for a SHIELD mini, a revival of the Golden Age heroine named Miss America, and an adventure for Israeli superhero Sabra. I'm also prepping a pitch for Image called *The Rift*, based on a published short story I have.

NRAMA: Hey—one last one, since we don't often speak to an active duty officer of any branch ... even though he wasn't Air Force ... thoughts on Captain America dying?

MY: For me the reader, all I can say is wow. Brubaker. He stunned me with how good the Winter Soldier/Bucky story was, and he stunned me further with how good the Captain America death story is.

For me as an armed forces member, I'm pleased with how widespread the story of Captain America's death reached, how mainstream it became. Regardless of people's political views today, it shows me people still have an American ideal in their hearts, something we can all look to and agree is a good symbol for the country. For those of us that are comic book readers, we read of the best and worst in all of us through these characters. For those uninitiated to comics, which is most people, their knowledge of comic books is only of the best in us.

What I mean is, those who don't read comics have an ideal in their minds when they think of Spider-Man (the little geek who made it big), Superman (the orphaned immigrant who found a home), and Captain America (the symbol of a nation). When I saw the nation's reaction to Cap's death, it made me realize that people still do love our country because they were mourning the death of our country's ideal. Even if many people don't know what we in the services do over here, I'm reminded that people still love America. And that makes the job worth it. 