



### The Military Career of Edgar Allan Poe

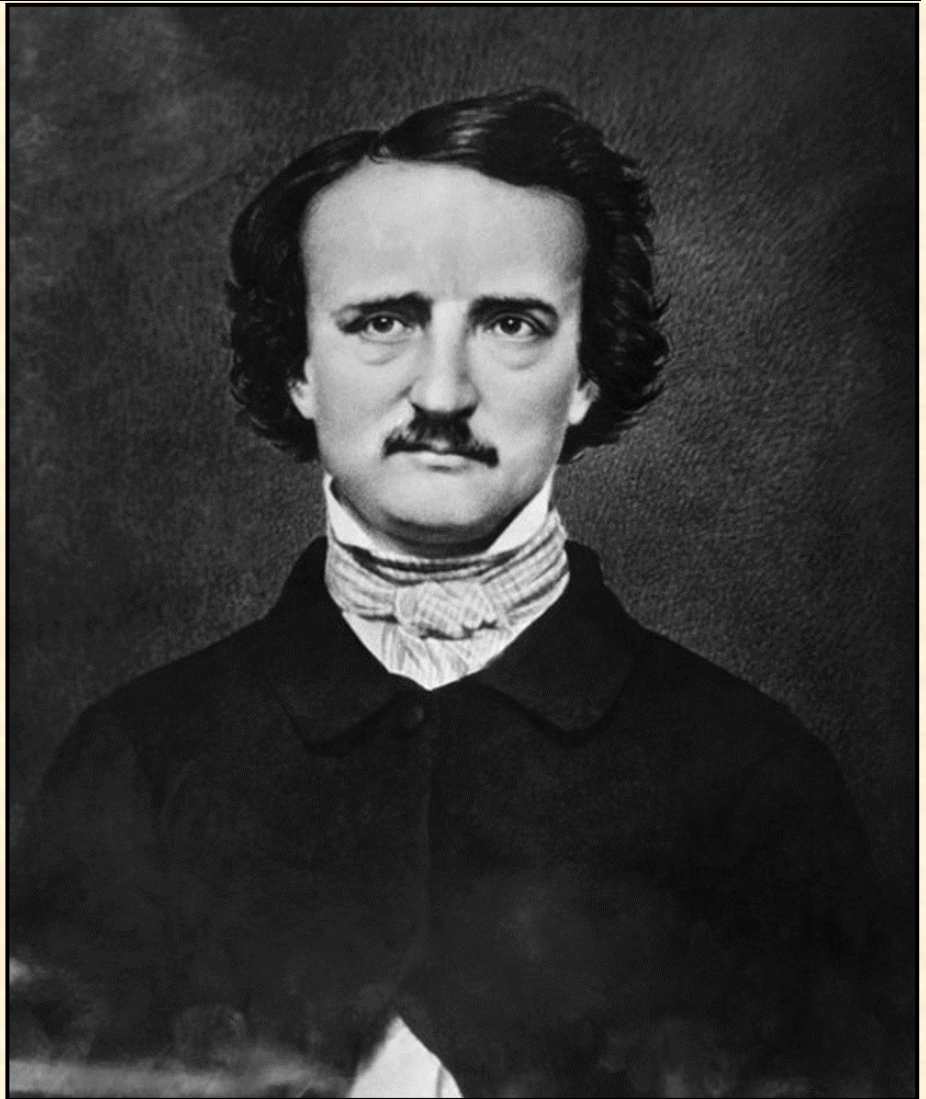
Although he would eventually become known as the Master of the Macabre in literary circles, author and poet Edgar Allan Poe nearly adopted military service as his life-long career. Poe was born on January 19, 1809, in Boston, Massachusetts. Within two years, his father had abandoned the family, and Poe's mother had died of tuberculosis. Poe soon joined the household of his uncle, Richmond (Virginia) merchant John Allan. Although never formally adopted, Poe adopted the Allan family name. Poe traveled to the United Kingdom in 1815, attending grammar school in Scotland and boarding schools in London before returning to Virginia in 1820.

Poe's military journey began in 1824, when he volunteered and served as a lieutenant within the Richmond Youth Honor Guard during a visit to the city by Marquis de Lafayette, hero of the American Revolution. He would remain in the volunteer unit through 1826. When another Richmond uncle, William Galt, died in 1825, he left Poe a sizable fortune. However, the youth soon squandered this inheritance through lavish spending and gambling. At the same time, Poe became a student of ancient and modern languages at the University of Virginia. After becoming estranged from Allan and accumulating debt, Poe dropped out of school in 1826 and moved to Boston. In need of income, Poe enlisted as a private in the U.S. Army in May 1827, under the alias Edgar A. Perry, for a five-year term in Company H of the 1<sup>st</sup> Artillery Regiment. Although he was just 18 years old, he claimed to be 22.

Poe first served at Fort Independence in Boston. During his first few months of service, he published his first book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, to little acclaim and less money. In November 1826, as a result of a malaria outbreak, the Army moved Poe's unit to Fort Moultrie, South Carolina. Poe seemed to flourish, benefiting from the structure and discipline of the military. In May 1828, he was promoted to the rank of artificer. This was a special rank reserved for experts who prepared and oversaw the company's ammunition supply. This promotion made him the 11th ranking enlisted soldier out of 400 other privates in the unit. As an artificer, Poe formed relationships of trust with his superiors. Consequently, by late November 1828, Poe told Lt. Joshua Howard, his company commander, that he had lied about his name and age during enlistment. He also reported that he had enlisted in part to spurn his foster father and indicated his desire to receive an early release from the five-year enlistment. Howard promised to help secure Poe's discharge, but only if the young man reconciled with Allan.

Allan ignored Poe's letters at first, while making it clear through intermediaries that he wanted Poe to stay in the Army. Howard recognized Poe's efforts, however, and soon introduced the young man to Col. James House, regimental commander, who reassigned Poe to the headquarters for duty in the adjutant's office on December 20, possibly to convince him to remain in service. In early January 1829, House promoted Poe to regimental Sgt. Maj., the highest enlisted rank open to him. At this time, Poe shifted his plans, seeking a discharge in order to enter West Point Academy. When Poe's foster mother died in February 1829, Allen resumed contact with him and supported the West Point plan. This support secured Poe's discharge from the regiment in April 1829. Poe immediately started a yearlong lobbying effort, asking Secretary of War John Eaton for a class seat at West Point. Through Allen's influence, Poe received a cadet appointment from President Andrew Jackson.

The 21-year-old poet entered the academy in July 1830. He excelled at classwork, thanks to his previous studies in languages and literature. Poe excelled as a "model cadet," ranking third in French and 17th in math while recording no disciplinary problems from July 1830 to January 1831. Growing tired of the discipline and bad food of the Army, Poe amused himself and his fellow cadets by writing poems and short amusements. Within months, however, his personal life had fallen into chaos. In October, Poe entered a marriage that became instantly rocky due to his extramarital affairs. His behavior led to both the dissolution of his marriage and his disinheritance by Allan. In revenge, Poe decided to stain Allan's reputation by deliberately getting kicked out of West Point.







John Allan Family Home — Richmond, Virginia

In January 1831, Poe stopped attending classes, exercises, and church. In February, he was court-martialed and charged with gross neglect of duty and disobedience of orders. He then racked up 66 disciplinary offenses in 30 days. He was finally court-martialed and dismissed from the academy in March 1831 for gross neglect of duty and disobedience of orders. As a parting shot, Poe secured \$170 in subscriptions from his fellow cadets to finance the publication of a new book of poetry. They expected him to produce work similar to the humorous amusements with which they were familiar. However, the volume was largely a reprint of previously published material. The result was met with disdain by the subscribers, with several cadets throwing their copies into the Hudson River.

Following his expulsion from West Point, Poe began to take writing more seriously. He went on to become one of America’s popular authors, known particularly for his treatment of mystery, science fiction, and the macabre. His work garnered international attention, and he went on to become the first well-known American to make a living as a writer, though he still continuously spent himself to the verge of poverty. Poe’s writing career was cut short after he died at the age of 40, when he was found in a rain-swept gutter in Baltimore. His passing brought its own brand of mystery, as Poe was found dressed in someone else’s clothing, delirious, uttering the name “Reynolds” before dying. Despite his short career, Poe, former Sgt. Maj. of the Army, left a lasting legacy of literature that remains with us two centuries later. ~~ *Dr. Paul-Thomas Ferguson*

Note: For a highly fictionalized account of Poe’s brief time at West Point, see the film *The Pale Blue Eye* (2022).

JMC Historical Document Collection

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This Month in Military History

**Jan. 2, 1492:** Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile force Muhammad XII, the last Nasrid Emir of Granada, to surrender the city, completing their “Reconquista” by ending nearly eight centuries of Muslim rule on the Iberian Peninsula.

**Jan. 5, 1781:** An expedition of 1,600 Loyalist troops attacks and burns the city of Richmond, Virginia, on behalf of the British, forcing Governor Thomas Jefferson to flee the colonial capitol. It is the most successful military campaign of the expedition’s leader: traitor and former patriot Benedict Arnold.

**Jan. 8, 871:** As a result of the Battle of Ashdown (in what is now Berkshire, England), King Æthelred I of Wessex, with the help of his younger brother Alfred, decisively defeat a Danish Viking army. Upon the death of Æthelred I three months later, Alfred becomes the fourth son of King Æthelwulf to take the crown. He eventually united the kingdoms of England, becoming King of the Anglo-Saxons, for which he earned the title Alfred the Great.

**Jan. 11, 1863:** While patrolling the waters off Galveston, Texas, the USS *Hatteras* (the guns of which included four 32-pounders and one 20-pounder), is attacked and sunk by the CSS *Alabama* (which carried six 32-pounders, one 68-pounder, and one 110-pounder).

**Jan. 14, 1129:** After 10 years spent headquartered in Jerusalem, the Knights Templar Order is formally recognized by the Catholic Church at the Council of Troyes. This allows the organization to establish a foothold in Europe. By the time they are disbanded in 1312, the Templars are the wealthiest military order in the Western World.

**Jan. 18, 532:** Byzantine Emperor Justinian I orders troops to quell the Nika uprising in Constantinople. Over 30,000 citizens are killed in the subsequent action, saving Justinian’s throne.

**Jan. 21, 1793:** King Louis XVI of France, following his conviction for high treason, is executed by guillotine during the French Revolution.

**Jan. 24, 1900:** At the Battle of Spion Kop, in the Second Boer War, South African Boers defeat a British army during an attempt to break the siege of Ladysmith.

**Jan. 28, 1671:** With the help of 1,400 men, Welsh pirate Henry Morgan captures Panama City from its Spanish defenders. They subsequently loot the city and set it on fire.