

Action Report

Subject: Memorial Day Writer's Project (MDWP)

Activity: Poetry, Prose and Song on the Mall

Date: May 30, 2005

Location: Washington, DC

(behind the sidewalk facing 20<sup>th</sup> Street and Constitution Ave.)

Weather: Blue sky, rolling clouds, 72 degrees.

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We packed a lot into one short day. We had twenty-one participants who read, played instruments, and sang of air strikes and firefights. We had old times and newcomers, daughters of veterans, wives of veterans, and friends of veterans, book authors, playwrights, poets, and non-poets.



As I was checking in with the Park Police (an annual ritual), I was invited to participate in a wreath laying ceremony by one of our sponsors, VVA Chapter 227, located in Vienna, VA. We walked down the path to the apex of the Wall and presented a wreath. **Larry Haworth** (Chaplain for Blackhorse, 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cav) gave an invocation and one of VVA members read several poems from memory and a portion of one of Steve Mason's poems to commemorate the occasion. Steve was the VVA Poet Laureate and passed away several days ago. Each member of the group was given the opportunity to pay tribute to friends lost in battle, to veteran friends who recently passed away, and to the spirit and dedication of all soldiers. It was a somber and penetrating moment; one which you wanted to hold onto.

Now back to the MDWP: We started at 11:30 as promised. Before Gerald Ney arrived to deliver an invocation, our host **Dick Epstein**, welcomed all and read a poem sent by Roy Correnti (USMC-Mass). The poem, written by James Leiker, was entitled "What I'll Be Doing for Memorial Day." It was a hard-hitting look at his tour in Vietnam. James, like Roy, was a combat Marine. Dick then read several of his favorites written by Clyde Wray (MDWP co-founder). Dick wailed "Of Common Ground," a poem about a writer who wanted to write, but was saddened by the insanity of war and "For Those Who Were Scared Shitless and Never Told Anyone, Cause Everybody Ain't No Hero--Some Just Did a Job." The title says it all. Both of these poems appear on the MDWP Web site and in the MDWP anthology. Dick also read a poem by a Jim Brown, a Marine stationed in Iraq who says "his goal is to get from this dusty wall to that one, and then home," and a new poem from Clyde Wray entitled "To My Friends Attending MDWP."

**Gerald Ney** (USA- Aerial Surveillance Officer '68-'69 and VVA Pennsylvania State Council Chaplain) made a tribute to VVA Poet Laureate Steve Mason and read an invocation from *Wisdom* 4: 7-8, 3:5 and 3:3. Terry Lockridge tells me he has carried that same quote in his wallet for 37 years along with the names of two Marines KIA: Gerald and James Gordon. Later in the afternoon, Gerald Ney read "Leaf Rider" the first poem he wrote about Vietnam, a poem that reflects on his missions and memories as Air Surveillance Officer. He also read an autobiographical poem "The Original Cherry Lt.," and "Marching on OJ and Tabasco," which tells of the Army routine at Ft. Benning, and Ft. Riley. He concluded with a poem he wrote while sitting in the audience; a poem about his great, great grandfather, a civil war veteran.

Co founder **Mike McDonell** read “Magilla,” a poem about James McGill. Panel 20E, Line 105. Mike then read “Passing the Hat” written by Vince Kaspar, mentor to many members of the MDWP and VVA Chapter 227. Vince passed away in 1995 and the MDWP and VVA 227 support a scholarship in his memory. Listen to some of Vince’s words “Some gave their arms, their eyes, their legs... their children yet unborn...we gave and were enriched and impoverished by the giving.” Mike came back a second time to read “A Condolence Call.” This is part of a longer story based on an incident that took place as Mike served as an Officer with the 1<sup>st</sup> Mar Div, I Corps. Mike’s characters and situations come to life with detail: Chieu Hoi, didi mou, piasters, ammo cans, paddy dikes, mud, Marines, mortar rounds, and bodies. Yeah, Mike. we remember.

First-timer **Norah Burns** brought her husband and her two children. Norah is the daughter of veteran Don Taylor, who saw duty in Da Nang and the Ashau Vally ‘69-‘71. Norah read a touching poem titled “Remembrance” for her father, and “Time in Service,” for her cousin who is currently serving in Iraq, which reminds us that family members serve time along with each soldier and “With Your Grace,” a tender conversation she has with her deceased Grandfather who served in the Army Air Corps.

**Holley Watts** (Donut Dolly, 66-67, 3rd Marine Amphibious Forces, Cu Chi, Da Nang, An Khe, and Chu Lai) read from her book “*Who Knew?*” (available from <http://www.holleywatts.com>). Holley described the life of a “Donut Dolly,” how they brought a bit of home to firebases and hospitals scattered throughout Vietnam, and recounted some of her memorable experiences—like asking for permission to land (in southern drawl ) from the cockpit of a small transport plane; mud everywhere; her mother’s greatest fear of Holley going to Vietnam was the potential of discovering sex for the first time; and her first stateside cab ride after returning home from Vietnam. Holley was recently featured on NPR and will be pleased to send you a signed copy of her playful book.

**Chuck Byler**, co-author of [Tempered Steel](#), read from his book about the only three-time winner of the Air Force Cross, Jim Kasler. Jim was a WWII B-29 tail gunner, a jet ace (F-86) in Korea, and was shot down over North Vietnam in his F-105. Chuck was pleased to report 2,800 copies of the book sold recently sold at Potomac Books. Chuck signed copies of his book and handed out free copies of [After Nam: A Police Story](#). Chuck was very patient and put up with our stubborn, singing microphone. We’ll hope to resolve that problem for his next reading on the Mall. Chuck also read a little Walt Whitman from the introduction to his book. I highly recommend this book.

**Steve Butler** read a poem “8 A.M.” in the voice of a young boy living in a time of the Cold War as he recalls the sights and sounds of military preparedness. This was Steve’s first time reading with us and we hope he becomes a regular.

**Gretchen Sullivan** is the daughter of Thomas Francis Sullivan, a Marine stationed in Chu Lai ‘67-‘68. Gretchen read “*Mau Tan*” (Year of the Monkey) “*Brotherhood*.” I remember the lines: “...a brother knows what a brother needs to keep him from shitting in his pants.”

Gretchen knows how to create a mood and hold you there. In her poem entitled “*Dog Pond*,” circa 1988, she drags you into her poem. Both of these poems are on the MDWP Web site.

Gretchen met Holley who lived on the same firebase where her dad served and our Navy Master Chief knew her dad's boss in the VA office where he worked. The world gets smaller.

**Kenneth Rodney Lee** (9th Marines, I Corps '68 and doesn't need a microphone due to his Marine Corps training) read several of our favorites: "Marble Men," "I Once Breathed the Fire of Dragons," followed by a soft-spoken love poem written by a Civil War veteran entitled "Letter From a Soldier", and a booming rendition of "Crisis of the Mind" a commentary on our environment since 9/11. Later in the afternoon, Ken read his humorous "The Phone Never Rings." It all comes together in the very last line. Ken has a chapbook entitled Whispers of Reality.

**Claudia Annis**, Senior Editor of *Vietnam* magazine read several poems sent to us by Nancy Morrey of Canada. "M-16 is Not a Motorway " and "Gentle Gauntlet." Claudia brought sample copies of Vietnam magazine, which quickly disappeared and she announced that the magazine was looking for writers to submit factual articles. I displayed one of Nancy's poems on our bulletin board and two women asked if they could publish it in a newsletter for a Marine organization. That should make her feel good. She read with us 2-years ago when she rode in Rolling Thunder.

**Larry Haworth** (Author and Chaplain USA- 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cav) read twice throughout the day from his book Tales of Thunder Run. Larry served along QL 1, the highway that ran from Saigon to Cambodia. He gave us a wonderful description of an ideal female named Margaret. The Chaplain related that all the guys in his unit liked to hold and hug her when they were lonely, only to find at the end of the poem that he was describing an adopted dog. He told us about the friendship of a pet chicken, squatting at night with a strobe light, and good advice. Larry used to be the Chaplain for VVA 227.

The tall thin man wearing black, **Dolf Droge**, appeared early this year. Dolf (NSA Specialist, advisor to Presidents Johnson, Nixon and Reagan, former talk show host, and songwriter) serenaded and educated throughout the day. Dolf's first trip to Vietnam was in 1958. He told us of the training programs he presented to Vietnamese students. He worked in Laos, VietNam, and Thailand with the US Information Agency and gave us several history lessons about the art of winning war without fighting, the communist's 6-percent rule, Robert McNamara's creative strategies, the benefits of nuoc maam, and Dolf's annual berating of Ted Kennedy. Toward the end of the day, a young woman from Minnesota wanted to take Dolf back home with her, but he couldn't fit into her Volkswagen. Dolf stands about 6' 6". He was still performing with his characteristic enthusiasm as the tent crew was disassembling the tent.

Forward Air Controllers (FACs) **Jonathan Myer** on guitar, and **Jim Roper** on keyboard, sang a variety songs during two stints at the microphone. Jonathan was an O-1E "Bird Dog" FAC assigned to Kontum Province and the DMZ. Jim put in four tours in Vietnam Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia. They opened with "Raven FACero," in which a young FAC loves not wisely but too well, followed by (in alphabetical order):

- "D-Day Dodgers" (British troops in WW-II Italy respond to Lady Astor's slur that they "dodged" the Normandy invasion);

- "Different Missions" (EB-66 pilot Bill Rothas's song about the loss of a buddy in an F-105);
- "Draft Dodger Rag" (a Korean War-era spoof on excuses made to avoid combat);
- "FAC and the Green Beret" (Jonathan's spoof in which everything that could go wrong for a Special Forces patrol and their FAC does;
- "Hello, A Shau Tower" (in which Bernie Fisher lands his A-1E under fire to pick up his squadron-mate "Jump" Myers, for which he received the Medal of Honor);
- "Ho Chi Minh Trail" (Toby Hughes's stark song about the dangers of interdicting North Vietnamese traffic along that treacherous infiltration route);
- Toby's "160 VC in the Open" (a FAC's "dream" airstrike);
- FAC Dave MacKay's "I Fly the Line" (describing his own missions in Pleiku Province and over Laos;
- "I'm a FAC" (in which a VC "Nguyen" turns the tables on an airborne FAC, in ragtime);
- Jonathan's "Last Flight" (about memories as flyers "go west");
- "Little Old Oscar Deuce" (Dave MacKay's "love song" to his O-2 FAC aircraft); and --
- "Mighty Dustoff" (his tribute to Army medevac helicopter crews in Vietnam);
- "My Peace Song" (Jonathan's wishful thinking before he "studies war no more");
- "The Old Pacific Sea" (an Australian song about throwing up in that ocean); plus --
- Jonathan's "How I Went IFR in Flying Buffalo Shit" (about the risks of landing his O-1E
- "Bird Dog" at a Special Forces camp one day in 1966, with his side windows open).

That was a lot of singing. Jonathan has several great CD's of his music and he'll be glad to sell you one.

Jim served throughout Southeast Asia from '70 to '75 as outlined below.

- 1970- Pleiku, RVN, Covey FAC- (harassed Uncle Ho's trucks and guns on the Trail.)
- 1971- Luang Prabang, Laos, Raven FAC- (assisted the King by eliminating NVA by the hundreds in the target-rich local area.)
- 1973- Udorn, Thailand, Chmaba FAC Instructor- (trained Cambodian FACs to defend themselves from vicious Khmer Rouge after Congress stopped the USAF from doing that. Ten former Ravens FACs were parked at Udorn to back up the ceasefire accord in Laos.)
- 1974-1975 Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Military Equipment Delivery Team-(operations analyst for the Military Assistance Program, trying to save a shred of democracy in a sad part of the world.)

Jim has also has written two books. We'll get them listed on the MDWP Web site.

**Terry Lockridge** (3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Div) came with his wife and read several poems written by his friend Doug Todd (1<sup>st</sup> Btn of the 9<sup>th</sup> Marines) from a new book Aftermath: A Song for Tyrone. Doug tells us he is going to donate a portion from the sale of his book to the MDWP. Terry also read a poem by a woman who lost her fiancé in Vietnam, a dedication to Linda Van de Vanter, a nurse and wonderful poet who served in Vietnam, a touching poem by a World Airways stewardess, who accompanied troops to Vietnam (a tough poem to read), and a poem by a veteran's wife, Lois Adams, who has for a long time supported returning veterans and is now in a hospice with terminal cancer. Listen to the last line in her poem "...and by God, one at a time, we're coming home."

**Mike Basdavanos** dedicated an excellent harmonica gospel and lament to door gunner Gerry Niewenhou and Mike's father. I heard a little "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" in Mike's melody. It was over too quickly, but I guess it's always good to leave the audience wanting more. Mike came back to show us he can also play a toe-popping, upbeat tune.

This is **Mark Pankow's** second time reading with us. He read "I Shined a Soldier's Boots Today" written by his brother, a Sgt. Major, serving in the Special Services Group, Afghanistan. Mark read "Farewell, Farewell, and Farewell," and "Shades of Purple," which incorporated photos and artwork, a contemporary version of "*Flanders Field*," and "White Legions," a rhyming poem about a military burial at Arlington. Mark is currently involved with the honor guard detail for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

**Joe Mitchler** told us an interesting tale about two young civil war vets who came back from the war with classic signs of what we now call PTSD.

**Rich Barrett**, first time reader and old time supporter, read a poem sent to us by FAC pilot Bruce Obermeyer. The poem "Promise Kept" related Bruce's promise to write daily to his wife and newborn daughter and his promise to return home. Rich also read "Dear

Vetran," a Christmas card sent by a child and the response from a remorseful Canadian veteran, written by Nancy Morey.

I was told that I read a poem by Steve Mason. As a tribute to Steve, I've included the poem on the following page. It's from Steve's book Johnny's Song, and its entitled "A History Lesson."

Since Vietnam,  
three things  
hold my universe together:  
gravity, centrifugal force  
and guilt.

It is not so strange, therefore,  
that the war is over for me  
just like it is for you.

Over.  
And  
over  
again...

There remains no resolution of this war  
beyond each man's obligation  
to his world and his conscience  
to record the True inner-history  
of his Vietnam experience.

Scholars believe it is too soon  
for a history of what I call  
the "outer war"  
perhaps it is too soon also  
for the "inner war"  
but I doubt it-  
for ours is not a justifiable history  
to be recoded in reasonable terms-  
ours, not a conflict involved  
in economic or politics  
militarism or religious crusade.  
No. Our war is a moral one.  
One to be agonized, not written.  
One which must be shared,  
not taught.  
Ours, too honest a lesson  
to be memorized;  
ours must be Understood.

Let the thin, bloodless men  
who are the educated sons  
of ribbon clerks  
spin the broken-glass facts  
of Vietnam into a golden yarn

to be woven, years later,  
into the rich, cultural tapestry  
of world history.  
It will be of little meaning  
and less consequence;  
a history of dates and time  
and pretty accuracies of who-hit-Johns.  
Fact is only a portion of the truth  
and the academic disciplines of today  
view through a narrow window  
(screening out both lux et veritas)  
And rationale is not enough to love on.

Color is to the eye  
what perspective is to the mind;  
it lends balance.  
But not all the red and blue arrows  
sweeping from all the pages  
of the Vietnam history books  
will give any hint of human direction  
beyond the deployment  
of allied and enemy troops.  
There will be no explanation  
of any part of the real war;  
the inner war.  
The actions and passions of life  
are not confronted  
nose to nose  
by historians.  
therefore, they do not FEEL IT.  
(And are loath in their accounts  
to moralize it).  
They TEACH the history  
that men such as you LIVED  
and that fallen comrades  
such as we have loved  
have died. . . .  
No one should write bloodlessly  
of spilled blood.  
Certainly, the only valid text  
that will ever be written  
about the Vietnam war  
has already been written:  
The Book of Names.

Somewhere, this Memorial Day

some of us will read it aloud  
from cover to cover  
And it will be too big to comprehend.  
It is doomed like the Nam it represents  
to be a part of the outer war  
unless we take it "inside."  
If we are ever to explain  
the true cost of war,  
better by far  
to pick one name  
and read it aloud  
from his last love letter...

From coast to coast  
we seem to be arranging  
an almost instinctive,  
undeniable pattern  
of Vietnam veterans  
An enormous, living,  
connect-the-dots puzzle  
that will spell it out  
the ultimate truth of Vietnam  
(from the sequential understanding  
of our combined inner war.)

As with all pointilism  
the individual dot seems lost  
and unimportant.  
Alone, we appear without validity.  
Our separate inner truths  
did not translate into English  
(or Vietnamese)  
its language voiced itself  
in isolated rage;  
often incomprehensible  
(even to ourselves)  
and always inappropriate.  
Yet, together we seem  
clearly to be outlining  
an unmistakable Reasonable statement  
large enough for all the world to see  
in its completed form:  
**NO MORE WAR.**  
It is almost as if we were part  
of some imponderable design  
an intricate and inexplicable  
as winter snowflakes must be

to a migrating duck.

It is time for our truth.  
It feels right.  
The classical Greeks knew it all along.  
(The nature of man is best known  
by considering nature itself.)  
It took Ulysses twenty years  
to return from the wars  
and put his house in order.  
It's taken twenty years  
to get from the Gulf of Tonkin Incident  
to here and now.  
And it's taken twenty years  
for this country to raise its children  
to be the average age  
of the college student to whom  
the subject of Vietnam is addressed  
and to whom the next war  
seems ready to be served.

Therefore, let you and I  
continue to join  
with our brothers and sisters  
and speak today  
(and every day)  
for truth and humanity  
(while there is still time).  
And if any should ask, Why U?  
We shall give them this good reason;  
We sent to Vietnam  
as American Fighting men  
and came back  
as human beings  
(that's why we didn't feel  
at home right away).  
And until we found each other  
we didn't understand our responsibility  
to that kind of citizenship.  
And now that we do,  
**WE HAVE IT TO DO!**

Even, there are things by which men  
seem willing to live  
and things, therefore, for which they  
seem willing to die.

As for me (if I am a choice)  
rather than lead one million boys to war  
I would prefer to die alone for peace.

it is simply to add out truth  
to the sum of all truth.

Such is the history lesson  
of my inner war.  
It may not be yours.  
Our task is not to agree--

In that will be a legacy  
worthy of our sacrifice  
and a monument  
fit to mark  
the end of our war. .

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It was a day of honor and a day of remembrance. Thank you for sharing yourselves, for raising your voices so that others won't forget, so that names on the Wall will never be just names. I hope to see many of you again next Veterans Day. God Bless.

Things we learned: Righty tighty, lefty loosey and some microphones like to sing.

For those of you who made a donation, my special thanks. The funds will be put to good use. Special thanks to VVA Chapter 227 and Liberty Bell Chapter 266 for their support.

**New books** written by MDWP participants:

Tempered Steel, Perry Luckett and Charles Byler, ISBN 1-57488-834-X.

After Nam: A Police Story, Carl Ax, ISBN 0-9622413-6-9.

Tales of Thunder Run, Larry Haworth, Chaplain USA, ISBN 1-932124-24-1.

Aftermath: A Song for Tyrone, Doug Todd, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 9<sup>th</sup> Marines, ISBN 0-9748463-0-9.

Who Knew? Reflections on Vietnam, Holley Watts, ISBN 0-99740585-2-1.

Quoth the Raven, Jim Roper, available from [www.ropersbooks.com](http://www.ropersbooks.com).

Aardvarks and Rangers, Jim Roper, available from [www.ropersbooks.com](http://www.ropersbooks.com).

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