

Action Report

Subject: Memorial Day Writer's Project (MDWP)

Activity: Poetry, Prose and Song on the Mall

Date: May 29, 2006

Location: Washington, DC

(behind the sidewalk facing 20th Street and Constitution Ave.)

Weather: Blue sky, rolling clouds, 86 degrees, no wind (pleasant--not too hot) .

We were pleased to have **Clyde Wray**, **Mike McDonnell**, and **Ed Henry** with us this Memorial Day. We had seventeen participants who read, played instruments, and sang of their friends, of air strikes, and of firefights. We had old timers and newcomers; that's the way it's supposed to be. Gunny (Marine Briah Conner) sent us his apologies for being AWOL. It seems he had a minor run-in with a ladder. Cathy Solomonson and her soon-to-be-veteran husband were out of town and were both missed. Gerald Ney sent his regrets and a hello to all; an injured leg kept him from driving to town. We also missed Jim Roper who moved out of the area this year.



Thanks to **Ken White** for the bottled water, **Brenda Myer** for her work manning the camera so that I can write this report, **Doug Bergman** for serving as MDWP greeter, and **Suellen Manning's** wonderful photo albums that capture MDWP activities since 1993.

We started on schedule (11:30 A.M.) with an invocation by **Chaplain Larry Haworth**. Larry was Chaplain for the 11th Armored Cavalry operating in Vietnam and Cambodia. Larry served along QL 1, the highway that ran from Saigon to Cambodia. Larry read excerpts from his book Tales of Thunder Run: "Dirty Words" and "Eating Dirt." Ask him for a copy of his book. It's a fun read.

Jonathan Myer (an in-country Forward Air Controller, or FAC) started us off with the story of Arthur Abramoff's last flight over the Dak Na valley in Kontum Province and the futile attempts to rescue him. Jonathan sang several times throughout the day. A listing of Jonathan's songs is provided below

- "Different Missions" (a tribute to downed pilot Dick Alley-based on a poem by Bill Rothas)
- "Frankie and Johnny" (Air Force Style, in which Johnny had a military funeral)
- "Reunion" (a tribute to combat flyers, honor, battle, and their final reunion).

Jonathan then told us the story and sang about the last mission of fellow FAC and classmate Willie Willbanks. Willie was shot down in February 1967 while firing out the window of his Bird Dog at a regiment of VC who were preparing to ambush a force of Vietnamese Rangers. Over the years, Jonathan has been able to give a copy of his ballad to Willie's widow and to other members of his family. Some of the other great songs Jonathan sang include:

- "Gathered Memories" (a tribute to deceased Red River Rats);
- "Last Flight" (as flown in an F101B interceptor of his first squadron);

- "The FAC and the Green Beret" (a spoof of their mission interactions)
- "Tally Ho" (Jonathan's summary of Bird Dog operations from Dong Ha and the DMZ)

Fellow FAC, **Dave McKay**, joined Jonathan and they took turns singing and sharing the microphone. Dave flew an O2-A out of Pleiku Province over the Ho Chi Minh Trail (142 missions) and killed trucks, caused trouble, and watched over recon teams in the southern area of Laos. Some of the many songs Dave sang during the afternoon included:

- "Little Old Oscar Deuce" (his "love song" to his O-2 aircraft);
- "Yankee Air Pilot" (the North Vietnamese name for our U.S. flyers over the North);
- "The Sycamore Tree" (the image of a hanging tree and Vietnam)
- "Saigon Warrior" (Saul Broudy's song about HQ staff officers with their hands in their pockets and nothing to do)
- "The FAC" (a poem forwarded by fellow-FAC Jim Roper: warlord of the sky--you never lived until you almost died);
- "Dear Ma'am" (a sardonic version of what an officer wouldn't say when crafting a letter home about a deceased pilot);

During the afternoon, Dave and Jonathan also sang in harmony to:

- "I Fly the Line" (Dave's description of a typical FAC mission in his province);
- "Mighty Dustoff" (Dave's tribute to the young Army helicopter crews with the 71st Medevac unit at Pleiku Air Base);
- "160 VC in the Open" (Toby Hughes' dream come true!)
- "My Peace Song" (Jonathan's tongue-in-cheek parody of Down by the Riverside. We all sang the chorus: "I aint gonna study war no more")

Jonathan ended with his "Answering the 9-1-1 Call" (with us joining the chorus: "Life and Liberty and Happiness as Freedom Marches On.). And Dave finished by leading us in the old Royal Flying Corps song from WW-I, "Stand to your Glasses." (A toast to their dead pilots.)

Co-founder **Mike McDonnell** started off by reading the first poem he wrote about Vietnam: a poem about James McGill, listed on Panel 20E, Line 105. Mike then read a poem written by deceased medic, Rod Kane, entitled "It's My Job;" A Moment in the Jungle" 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. Mike also read a touching poem written by Cathy Solomonson. The poem is entitled "Slow Dancing at the 24th Evac." Mike then read a poem written by Roger Dorsey "Panel 18E, Line 115," a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh, entitled "Recommendations," and a poem written by Davis Marshall, entitled "I Have Lived in a Time of Heroes." All but one poem read by Mike appear in the MDWP Anthology.

A subdued **Doug Bergman**, MDWP greeter and book salesman, told us of his recent trip to Vietnam, personal haunting memories of a hustling coke boy, and his involvement in improving a local school by building a bathroom and a new roof. Doug read from several sections from his Book "Names I Can't Remember" and from an official summary report on POWs.

It was apparent that no one wanted to break for the ceremonies at the Wall, so we continued on. Doug also told us a little of another character in his book: the Baha'i, a young boy he met in basic, who for quite a while, refused to shave off his beard.

Dick Epstein, read a poem written by Clyde Wray "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 parts of "It Don't Mean Nothing" written by Gary Jacobs and "Welcome Home Soldier" a poem sent to us by Rudy Ann Gunneson-Polling.

Terry Lockridge (3rd Marine Div) came with his wife and told us of how the MDWP and the Internet helps many veterans contact each other and open up. Terry suggested that we all reach out to the current generation of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. Terry read an emotional poem by a veteran's wife, Lois Adams, who started a Web site for returning veterans. The poem is entitled "One at a Time, Were Coming Home." A poem by Dave Jones: an 11B with the 11th Airborne entitled "I Should Have Known."

To our surprise, **Clyde Wray** sauntered into the tent sometime in the early afternoon. Hailing from Nova Scotia, he made a train-run to the west coast, the deep south, and then Washington, DC (just in time). It was great to see him and hear him once again. Clyde read twice and was eloquently and professionally introduced by Mr. Ed Henry. Ed also gave a nice overview of the beginnings of the MDWP and the work done by Mike and Clyde. Clyde writes using a conversational tone, but always manages to tug on your heart.

Some of what Clyde read includes:

- "All in Good Faith" from a play recently written, directed and produced by Clyde;
- "What the Dead Man Said as They Closed the Lid;"
- "My Own True Love: War" from the MDWP Anthology;
- "Good Neighbor Policy;" (A new "Canadian" poem)
- "A Brief Encounter on Veterans Day;"
- "This Poem is About Repetition, About Genocide;"
- "Well Excuse the F-- Out of Me;"
- "An Ode to a Pair of Thais, "
- "A Poet Understood, But Never Really Explained,
- "Daddy, I Remember"
- "The Revolution Has Been Put on Hold"
- "It Was no Special Day, Yet We--." (We've Not Forgotten You)
- "Futile Efforts of Every Veteran"

I missed a couple, but you were supposed to be here. You can hear Clyde read at www.clydeawray.ca

Kenneth Rodney Lee (9th Marines, I Corps '68 followed Clyde and gave him a good run for his money. Ken read several of our favorites: "Marble Men," "Bastions of War", "I Once Breathed the Fire of Dragons," followed by a soft-spoken poem written for fellow amputees "Will You Still Love Me?" and a booming rendition of "Crisis of the Mind" a commentary on our environment since 911.

One of our pleasant surprises was **Theresa O'Rourke** dressed in red hat, matching blouse, and black jacket in 92 degrees. In thick Irish brogue, she recited several poems "Oh My Ireland", "From a Bench," a blunt poem about a brief conversation she had with a homeless vet, a poem about treating the homeless with respect as if each were Jesus (a Buddhist practice too), "At Home in the West—," an ode to William Butler Yates, and a humorous poem recalling the day she was dumped 33 years, and "*If I Was a Man I'd Learn How to Curse*,"- a poem about a failed attempt in finding employment. She recited all of her poems from memory. Ms O'Rourke is a regular at Iota venue in Arlington, VA.

I saw Joe Mitchler sitting in the audience for a few moments taking notes then quickly disappeared. Sorry we didn't get to hear what our old friend has been up to.

Rich Barrett, stopped by for a while and left some steam (his); something about Mr. Bush and his leadership of the U.S.

Historian, author, poet, and storyteller, **Lad Carrington** rode up from North Carolina on his Harley to participated in Rolling Thunder. Lad told us about an interview with PBS where he was ask to explain the relationship of the Vietnam veteran, Memorial Day, and Rolling Thunder. Lad's answer was "Freedom." Lad also read one of his keynote poems *Give me the Wind* and *Have you Seen my America?* a poem about touring our country on motorcycle and his idea of what makes a hero.

Holley Watts (Donut Dolly, 67/68, 3rd Marine Amphibious Forces, Chu Chi, DaNang, An Khe, and Phu Bie) gave a presentation at the Nurses Memorial and spent some time with us. Holly read several poems we haven't heard before, "Panel 47W" a poem about a veteran's first visit to the Wall, and *You Are a Great Concern to Me* (and a 14-line sonnet dedicated to Harry Bowman-panel 57E, Line 14), *Angles: Girls in Blue*, (in other words, Donut Dollies_ a poem about the young girls in blue traveling from firebase to firebase to give the gift of a smile).

Another pleasant surprise: Lad convinced singer **Alexandria Lajoux**, who sang at the Nurses Memorial, to present her song *We Thank You*, to the participants of the MDWP. Alexandria led us in this wonderful tribute to all U.S. Armed Forces. She is associated with the "The Cultural Strategies Institute." located in Seneca MD. Their mission is to share ideas and experiences to honor our soldiers. They recently held a fish fry and BBQ at White's Ferry for several vets recovering at Walter Reed and are also involved in specialized veteran training programs. For more information on the activities of this newly formed organization, can contact Lowell Christy (301) 869-9098 or www.OperationWeThankyou.us

Dolf Droge (NSA Specialist, advisor to Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, and former local talk show host) serenaded and educated us twice throughout the day. Dolf sings 26 of the 156 songs about Vietnam that comprise the General Ed Lansdale collection stored in the Library of Congress. He also told us about his run-in with Johnson and of course the end of his political career. Dolf's first trip to Vietnam was in 1958. He was in Laos, Viet Nam, and Thailand with the U.S. Information Agency. He told us of his travels throughout Vietnam and conversations about the art of war from the Vietnamese perspective; how to win a war without fighting; a song about the character and benefits of nuoc mam, and he

narrated and sang about the life of Uncle Ho and his 22 aliases. Dolf's *tour de force* is his account (in speech and song) of how Ted Kennedy inserted into the Defense Budget Bill the prohibition against funding any further operations in Southeast Asia after the 1973 truce -- thereby dooming the Republic of Viet Nam when the North invaded (again) in 1975) Dolf was still talking to anyone who would listen as the tent was being taken down.

That's a fairly accurate picture of what went on Memorial Day 2006. It was a good day. Hell it was a great day, being together, honoring the memories of veterans we knew and those we didn't know. A day of honor and a day of remembrance. Thank you all 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.

Request 1: If anyone has any suggestions on how to reach out to today's veterans, let's hear it.

Request 2: If anyone has any suggestions on how to reach interested students in the Washington area, let's hear it.

Request 3: If you have any suggestions about the MDWP readings on the Mall, let's hear it.

Things I learned:

Push the red button to start the camcorder. (Thanks Lad)

When the camcorder screen goes black, replace the battery

When it stops, replace the film.

For information contact eppy1111@aol.com or see our Web site at www.memorialdaywritersproject.com