

Action Report: Memorial Day Writers' Project (MDWP)

Activity: A Tribute to all Veterans

Date: May 25, 2009

Location: Washington, DC

(Constitution Ave., and 21 St., behind the sidewalk facing Constitution Ave.)

Weather: High clouds, 83 degrees, occasional showers toward the end of the day.



On Memorial Day 2009, we had eighteen participants who read, played, and sang of heroes, lost friends, air strikes and firefights. We had Nancy Lynch, columnist and author of *Viet Nam Mailbag* at the greeting table along with Dick Morris' wife Barbara. We had free copies of "Hugs," poems written Vince Kaspar; Nancy's book, "*Vietnam Mailbag*;" award winning DVDs from Donut Dolly Holley Watts "*A Touch of Home*" and "*In the Shadow of the Blade*;" a new chapbook produced by Maritza Cohn and a *Sistah Joy*; copies of Dick Epstein's MDWP anthology, "*A Common Bond*;" "*Cologne Number 10 for Men*," written by Dick Morris, and his CD, "*Skytroopers*."

Tom McLean started us off and dedicated his songs to two fellow veterans, who recently succumbed to the ravages of war: Roy Correnti (USMC), and Tom's neighbor Ron Dixon (USA). Ron deployed from Fort Devons with the 196th Light Infantry Brigade and Tom honed his skills there as an MP. Tom served in Qui Nhon and was one of the early participants of the MDWP in 1993. Tom sang three original songs: "Aging Veteran," "Mission of a Different Kind," and "Conversation with Grandfather." His first song focuses on the demons of war (Agent Orange in this case) still chasing our veterans today, challenging them, and putting them into early graves. "Mission of a Different Kind," tells a true story of two Marine Grunts (David Huffman from DE and Terry Barnette from WV) who were wounded by the same booby trap. Each left Vietnam thinking he was the lone survivor. After many years, they ran into each other in a small town in West VA. Once again, they go on missions together; but now they walk the streets looking for those in need.



Tom's third song "Conversation with Grandfather," is a mythical conversation with Tom's Civil War ancestors about the state of veterans then and now. Tom's maternal Great Grandfather Giuseppe Arancio became known as Joseph Orange and was a just-off-the-boat Italian immigrant who joined the 12th MA Infantry. After being captured, he spent 11 months in Andersonville. Tom's Paternal Great Great Grandfather (Oliver McLean) was 2nd generation Scotch-Irish and was in the 53rd GA Infantry. He died from wounds suffered at Antietam. I have no need for Dylan or Guthrie when we have singer/songwriter Tom McLean.



Bruce Waxman told us his tale of getting a speeding ticket while trying to reach Cam Ranh from Nha Trang before dark. As an advisor, Bruce was also in the position to advise his new CO as to the punishment for such a crime. After his talk, Tom McLean (an ex MP) told Bruce the MP's at times established speed traps to keep in practice. Thanks for the humorous story Bruce.

Mark Pankow, a retired MP/Counterintelligence LTC, read three poems. The first was one was written at the request of his American Legion Post and was entitled "For Those Who Also Serve." It addresses the devotion, sacrifices and cohesion of family members and others who work in support of deployed service members. "Winnie," a humorous poem about a rowdy biker-barmaid, was Mark's second choice, imitating the rhyme and meter of Rudyard Kipling's "Tommy." Kipling's poem is narrated by Tommy Atkins, the British Version of our G.I. Joe. It is one of protest over society's treatment of Soldiers. Mark's last reading was "Where Have You Gone, Old Ironsides?" Old Ironsides refers to the Constitution and the poem protested encroachments on the First and Second Amendments and the suspicion cast over returning war veterans in the recent Department of Homeland Security Internal Threat Assessment.



We thank Mark for encouraging his friend, **Patty Resse**, to join us at the MDWP tent on the Mall. Patty sings and plays guitar. Patty did three songs (not nearly enough). First was an original composition: "Last Call for Love," a song that tells a bittersweet story of a couple's last night together before deploying for war. Next was "Me and Bobby McGee," a tune made famous by Janis Joplin, written by Kris Kristofferson, Rhodes Scholar, Army Captain and Vietnam helicopter pilot. Patty then played "Who's got your Back?" an award winning song in the Mid-Atlantic song writing competition in the Gospel / Inspirational category. See: <http://www.pattyreese.com>

Air Force Forward Air Controllers (FACs) **Jonathan Myer** and **Dave MacKay**, sang 15 songs. As first arrival, Jonathan did several of his own, then Dave joined in and did the rest in two sets. They mixed their own songs with those of other combat balladeers. Jonathan flew the O-1E "Bird Dog," as a Kontum Province FAC and over the DMZ, from April '66 through February '67. Dave flew the O-2A "Super Skymaster" (aka "Oscar Deuce") from Pleiku northwest to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos in '69. While both were based in II Corps (the Central Highlands), most of their songs reflect air operations throughout the Southeast Asia theater (i.e., Laos, Cambodia, North as well as South Vietnam and the DMZ. The FACeros' songs are listed, with notes, at the end of our report.



Gerry Ney was OIC of an Imagery Interpretation Section in the 172nd Military Intelligence Detachment with the 173rd. Gerry read poems had especial meaning for him on Memorial Day. The first "An Irish Mensch," in tribute to his friend, Jerry McManus, who recently passed away from the effects of Agent Orange. McManus served with the 1st Cav and fought in the Ia Drang Valley. Gerry then read "The Haunting Dream," which deals with the effects of fall of Saigon on the South Vietnamese and

Vietnam vets. For a second round, Gerry read a poem triggered by watching "Saving Pvt Ryan," a tribute to 1st Lt. Anderson "Skip" Renshaw, who served with the 1st Air Cav and was killed on Easter Sunday 1969, 4 days after returning from R&R with his wife in Hawaii; "Gone With the Grin," a poem about a Vietnam vet co-worker that decided he had enough; and "Vietnam Lowdown In-Country Backstabbin' Backside Fraggin' Cook Cuppa Coffee Blues." This lovely poem tell a true story about going through five different Mess Sergeants before finding one who wouldn't let his cooks maintain an ongoing affair with Mary Jane and got fraggd for his efforts.

Richard Morris was a rifle platoon leader with A Co. 2nd Bn 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division in '67 and '68. Dick sang tunes from his CD "Skytroopers, (lyrics can be seen at www.vietwarsongs.com). His CD is available at <http://cdbaby.com/cd/richardmorris>. One of his songs, "Digging' a Hole," was a Finalist in the Vocal Jazz & Blues category of the 23rd Annual Mid-Atlantic Song Contest. (www.saw.org/masc.asp). Richard also wrote a novel "Cologne No. 10 for Men," fiction that grew out of his songs and experiences in Vietnam. The following lists the songs sung by Dick:



- "Charlie," an alluring song about Richard's elusive new friend, Charlie.
- "John Wesley," a song about a 1st Cavalry Division point man who volunteered for point for an entire year, killed a dozen VC.
- "The Bong Song Bridge," a catchy tune about the easy time spent guarding the Bong Song Bridge.
- "Digging a Hole," about fox holes and sleeping holes dug to protect all grunts.
- "When's The Sun Gonna Shine On Camp Evans?" monsoon season at the northern HQ of the 1st Cav.
- "Lonesome for You," a love song from Richard to his wife, Barbara.
- "Chanh Giao Cave," a song about the Rockpile Operation of A Co. 2/5, a 13-day siege where 179 NVA were extracted from holes between the rocks.

Steve Calabrese walked by the MDWP tent and asked if he could read an essay he recently wrote, entitled "To the American Soldier." This was Steve's well written thanks for the selfless dedication of the American soldier.



MDWP co-founder, **Mike McDonell**, paid tribute to our friend **Roy Correnti** (3rd Mar Div) who recently passed away. Roy, an artillery mechanic, did his job to the best of his ability and he loved being a Marine. Mike also commended Roy's wife Lisa and their children for taking such good care of Roy. Mike read several of Roy's songs: "Brother and Sisters of America!" "Through Vince's Eyes," a song written by Roy about Vince Kaspar, who gave his eyes as an organ donation at his death in 1995; Roy's "War is Hell, Don't Go In There!," which is filled with the sights, sounds, and conversation under fire in Dong Ha. We will miss you Roy. God Bless. Mike also read several of his poems including an essay on Memorial Day he wrote as a newspaper columnist and a tribute to several of Mike's Marine friends: Ronald H. Brown (Panel 37E Line 079); Walter M. Murphy (Panel 36E, Line 026) and James B. McGill (Panel 20E, Line 105). They were KIA in Hue, Phu Loc, and Con Thien, respectively.



Holley Watts (Donut Dolly, '66-'67, 1st and 3rd Marine Amphibious Forces, DaNang, Chu Lai, An Khe, and Cu Chi) put on a program based upon her book, "Who Knew." She was backed by Steve Simons and Mike Simpson. Steve Simons and Mike Simpson quietly backed up Holley with songs from the '60s like "Leaving on a Jet Plane," "Where Have All The Flowers Gone," and "War Never Ends." Holley announced that her documentary entitled "A Touch of Home: The Vietnam War's Red Cross Girls," won first place for at the 2009 GI

Film Festival for Short Documentary. Ask Holley about her DVD. Holley can be reached at holley.watts@gmail.com. You can see a trailer of the movie at:

<http://www.arrowheadfilms.com/atouchofhome.html>. Special tributes were made to Lance Corporal John Kearnan Clarke, Panel 16E, Row 27 and Harry "Doc" Thomas Bowman, II, Panel 57E, Row 14.

Speaker, Author, and performance **Poet, Sistah Joy**, read a poem entitled "Remembrance," a tribute to those who have left us with a strong imprint in our mind and our heart, long after they have gone; "Humanities Legacy," a poem presented as part of a tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King at the US Department of State, and "I Proudly



Wear the Flag,” an affirmation of the meaning of the flag and noble precepts it should represent. Sistah Joy leads a poetry ministry in Ft. Washington, MD and co-produces an award-winning CTV cultural arts program “Sojourn with Words,” which is viewed in Prince George’s County. She also hosts a monthly poetry event at Annie’s Art Gallery in Camp Springs, Maryland.



Mike Basdavanos did a great job with a “wandering harmonica solo” as a tribute to a high school friend, WO1 Gerald (Gerry) Niewenhous Jr. I kept hearing phrases from Fats Domino’s “Walking to New Orleans,” the Beatles’ “Paperback Writer” “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” and “Work Song” by Cannonball Adderly. Mike’s friend Gerry was KIA while he was an Aircraft Commander operating in I Corps. Gerry was assigned to the 1st Aviation Brigade and was part of D/3/5 CAV. Mike remembers his friend as very mischievous and can imagine Gerry putting his aircraft in the middle of the action. He also would like to acknowledge the service of his father, John Basdavanos USN. Mike is readying himself to embark on a new career as a practitioner of Medical Qi Gong and teaches Tai Chi Chuan and Qi Gong at various locations in the Metro area. Check out his web site at: www.dancingmountain.net

Maritza Rivera Cohen, founder of the Mariposa Poetry Salon of College Park, MD was also with us to celebrate her son’s recent return from Iraq. Maritza read Encounter, a five-part, two voice poem that takes the listener through several war time situations. Toward the end of her poem, a terrorist with hidden explosives walks toward a check point where a U.S. soldier is raising his weapon in preparation to shoot, as he is taught. The last line reads: “What ever happens next...matters.” Our host, Dick Epstein, read the soldier’s part. Maritza also brought advanced copies of her new chap book entitled: “A Mother’s War.”



Clyde Christofferson read excerpts from a recently published collection of letters sent home by his 19-year old brother, Scott Christofferson, who was ambushed near Chu Lai as part of Operation Wheeler, while serving with the 101st as an embedded combat reporter. Scott routinely participated in operations, and his loss typifies the randomness of death that was always with us. Scott, and the 2nd platoon, was ambushed by two well armed North Vietnamese Companies—approximately 200 enemy soldiers. The enemy was driven off, leaving 60 North Vietnamese dead at the cost of 17 members of the 101st. Scott refused to leave his position as he provided defensive cover fire enabling other members of his platoon to withdraw. Scott would have made a great novelist. He was young, idealistic, observant, pensive, and objective in his writing.



We were happy to see our friend **Alexandra Lajoux** with her golden voice and bountiful energy. She sang in the background with our FAC’s, Jonathan and Dave, and sang her beautiful and heartfelt trademark song that came to her as she slept: “We Thank You.” Her CD is being distributed by American Forces Network Iraq. Alexandra is also a Soldiers’ Angel. Copies of her CD



can be obtained at <http://www.alexismusicstudio.com>. She uses the funds she receives for packages she sends to our troops in Iraq. To give Jonathan a brief rest, Alexandra sang a little of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” and “To Everything There is a Season,” by the Birds.



And here we have **Sgt. Major Top Holland** who joined the service at the age of 14 and served in WWII, Korea, and three tours in the RVN in the Central Highlands. Top read a poem about “The Little People,” he befriended as part of a Special Forces A Team and then sang a sweet song entitled “Red Ribbon for His Mama’s Hair.” Top was deeply involved with the MIA/POW issues and co-authored a book on the subject, entitled “Perfidy.”

The following is a list of songs sung by FACs **Jonathan Myer** (O-1E “Bird Dog”) and **Dave MacKay** (O-2A “Oscar Deuce”):

1. “Jolly Green” (a staple of the late “Bull” Durham), is about the Air Force’s large HH-3E helicopter, nicknamed after the Jolly Green Giant for its camouflaged paint scheme, and used primarily to rescue downed aircrews and ground troops in the highest-threat areas of Southeast Asia — a most welcome sight for any flyer “. . . high in this tree, Afraid of Charlie as I can be”!
2. “Warrior Bards” (by Irv LeVine) pays tribute to several fellow-balladeers of the SEA War, who keep our generation’s combat memories alive. A couple more verses (by Jonathan) add FAC singers (who emerged after Irv had written his song) and update the song from Irv’s Johnson-McNamara years to summarize the war’s ignoble end.
3. The USS Oriskany’s three deployments to the South China Sea were marked by heavy losses of planes, pilots and ship’s crew — most notably from an on-board fire in October 1968. Jonathan read the latest annual “letter” to his lost roommate by Navy CAPT Dick Schaffert (Ret.), a poignant memorial across the gulf between life and death.
4. “Bless ‘Em All” may be the only military song that transcended its original obscene language to become a radio hit during and following WW-II. From a typical “Willie and Joe” complaint against all NCOs, it expands to include flyers’ complaints — until an added verse literally blesses the crew chiefs, controllers, weapons, refuelers and rescue forces that support our flyers at war today.
5. “Throw a Nickel on the Grass (Save a Fighter Pilot’s Ass)” a Korean War parody of a temperance song (itself a parody of a hymn none of us has yet identified), describes the mishaps of an F-86 “Sabrejet” pilot whose situations go from bad to worse. (This song has also led to the widening custom placing nickels on our fellow-flyers’ caskets or urns at their funerals.)
6. “Itazuke Tower,” another Korean War-era spoof, pits a desperate P-51 pilot (Dave) against a snotty airfield control tower operator (Jonathan). “Air Force 801” loses out to the unsympathetic tower operator, until (in a couple of added verses) he gets his revenge from Pilot’s Heaven in a brand-new F-22!
7. “The Misty Song” (sung by Dave) commemorates the “Misty” FACs who flew two-seat F-100Ds at low altitude and high speed against the increasingly lethal ground defenses in Laos and North Vietnam that had made the original “Slow FACs” too vulnerable to operate effectively. (In fact, the ‘first “Misty” commander, George E. “Bud” Day, was himself shot down, captured, and later awarded an MOH for his courage, leadership and resistance to [real!] torture while a POW.)
8. In “How I Went IFR in Flying Buffalo Shit,” Jonathan described in full detail his 30 July 1966 landing at Dak Pek, Kontum’s most challenging Special Forces camp, “when the shit . . . literally hit the fan.” Moral? The environmental hazards posed by “V.C. buffalo” can be more dangerous than ground fire!
9. Dave’s “Little Old Oscar Deuce,” which he flew over the Ho Chi Minh Trail throughout 1969, may have needed a “Forty-five hundred foot takeoff roll” (“Too much weight and not enough coal”), but it carried a solid load of marking rockets and flares to make life hot for North Vietnam’s “nocturnal trail movers” infiltrating the South with a steady stream of NVA troops and supplies.
10. “Mighty Dustoff” is Dave’s tribute to the young Army helicopter crews with the 71st Medevac unit at Pleiku Air Base. “Dustoff” was the universal call sign for these UH-1 (“Huey”) helicopters, and their crews regularly flew them “into harm’s way” to rescue the WIAs (and retrieve the KIAs), whether U.S., ARVN or V.C., during as well as after fire-fights. Many owed their lives to them.

11. "Saigon Warrior" (by Saul Broudy; led by Dave) satirizes the headquarters staff people that appeared (to the frontline troops, at least) to sport all the equipment and attitude of a combat soldier while enjoying their comforts and safety amid the fleshpots of Saigon.
12. "Dueling 'Yankee Air Pirates.'" "Yankee Air Pirates" was the name given by the North Vietnamese to the U.S. Air Force and Naval airmen who were bombing their country. The term was adopted with pride by said airmen. Dick Jonas wrote the original song about them, while FACs Dave MacKay and Jim Roper adapted it to their own out-of-country FAC missions, Jonathan sang Dick's verses, Dave sang the FAC variants, and both joined in on the choruses.
13. "Gathered Memories" is Jonathan's progressive remembrance of fellow-air warriors from the bold days of their flying youth to present-day toasts to their memory, when we will all "gather around that table/ In that Ready Room in the sky."
14. "Last Flight" is Jonathan's tribute to his first squadron and how all military flyers' first units provide them with the personal skills, operational experience and social camaraderie that inform the rest of their lives: "Flying and fellowship, missions and crew — A thousand souvenirs for those who flew."
15. "Answering the 9-11 Call," Jonathan's response to the "wake-up call" of that terrible day in 2001, contrasts the moral strength and determination of the United States with the terrorism and evils of Islamist extremism, and predicts ultimate victory "As Freedom marches on."
16. "Stand to Your Glasses," a collective toast to lost comrades during the Great War, comes from British Royal Flying Corps units operating in France, when new pilot casualties were so high that NCOs had to come to the Officers' Mess to teach their replacements the words. Today, nearly a hundred years later, it is still a standard finale at military flyers' songfests.

Books and CD's by MDWP Presenters

- Scott A. Christofferson, [Your Hero and Mine, Scott](#), a collection of insightful and penetrating letters written by a 19-year old Information Officer attached to the 101st Screaming Eagles.
- William Powell, [A Taste of War](#), an Infantry Platoon Leader's recollections of service at Tay Ninh and Fire Base Hunter with the 25 Infantry Division.
- Richard Morris, [Cologne No. 10 for Men](#), a catch 22 look at life with the 1st Cav. Order from Amazon.com and other online booksellers.
- Richard Morris, [Skytroopers](#), original songs written in Vietnam. Order from www.cdbaby.com/cd/richardmorris.
- Joy Matthews Alford, [Lord, I'm Dancing As Fast As I Can](#), Sistah Joy's first book of poetry.
- Joy Matthews Alford, [From Pain To Empowerment](#).
- John Top Holland and Father Patrick Bascio, [Perfidy: The Govt. Cabal That Knowingly Abandoned Our POWs and lkeft Them to Die](#).
- Maritza Rivera Cohen, [A Mother's War](#).
- Jonathan Myer, [Songs of the O-1E Bid Dog](#) and CD's from the [Society of Old Bold Aviators](#). Order from: j-bmyer-alexva@erols.com.

- Nancy Lynch, [Vietnam Mailbag : Voices From the War, 1968-1972](http://www.vietnammailbag.com/), available at <http://www.vietnammailbag.com/>
- Alexandra Lajoux, [My Country is Your Country](http://www.alexismusicstudio.com/), a blend of country, folk, gospel and bluegrass. The album's title song, "We Thank You," was sung by Alexandra at the MDWP Tent on the Mall. Available at http://www.alexismusicstudio.com

Thank you to all of you who participated and to those who help sponsor MDWP activities on the Mall. Special thanks to VVA 227 for their support. Our best wishes to our brothers Brian "Gunny" Conner and Marine Roy Correnti. If you have any suggestions for corporate sponsorship, let me know. **Don't forget to visit our website: www.Memorialdaywritersproject.com** or contact me at www.dick_epstein@hotmail.com. God Bless.

We, artists of every persuasion, come to the MDWP Tent and the Wall to remember in our unique way. Remember we do. The above is a fairly accurate picture of what went on at the MDWP tent on Memorial Day 2009. It was a great day, being together, honoring the memories of veterans we knew and those we didn't know. 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.

P.S. A donation is most welcomed to help pay for the rental of our tent on the Mall and to keep the MDWP going. The address is: MDWP, Richard Epstein, 1024 Stirling Rd., Silver Spring, MD 20901.

