

Action Report: Memorial Day Writers' Project
Activity: Memorial Day - A Tribute to all Veterans
Date: May 30, 2011
Location: The National Mall, Washington, DC
Constitution Ave., and 21 St. (behind the sidewalk
facing Constitution Ave.)
Weather: Clear Sky, 94.4 degrees (hot and humid).



**MDWP's Photo Display
on the National Mall**

We came to remember and speak our piece—that's exactly what we did. Participants of the Memorial Day Writers' Project (MDWP) on the National Mall in Washington, DC, included two singing Faceros (Fa-CARE-roos), Grunts, Jarheads, Squids, a male nurse (active duty), a Corpsman, a civilian nurse (Cardio thoracic Clinical Specialist), a journalist, an attorney, a professor, a veteran mother of two active duty veterans, a shy and overly polite ex-M48 tank commander, a singing/guitar playing MP, two poet activists, a Donut Dolly, and several others I can't easily categorize. We had twenty-two presenters, including two veterans who recently served in Iraq and Afghanistan (as well as Kosovo, Rwanda, and Sudan). Both are in process of writing about their experiences. It was a great day, as it always is, sharing our songs, our stories, our hearts, and a few tears.



The Marine in his dress blues, pictured at the left, stood for hours with little movement as he saluted the symbol of our nation's fallen veterans during the Rolling Thunder Run. Dick Epstein served as host and Barbara Morris and Nancy Lynch Steele were chief greeters in-charge of book and CD sales. Barbara and Nancy gave away all of our free copies of "Hugs," (a chapbook written Vince Kaspar); previous MDWP After Action Reports; the MDWP Mission Statement; and the writings of several veterans about the meaning Memorial Day.

This year we had an added attraction of a tri-fold photo display showing photos collected by Dick Epstein circa Viet Nam 1968. The display was designed and constructed by Dick's eldest son, Ted. Richard's other son, Sam, was on hand to capture video and voice (digital files) until equipment batteries and memory cards gave out.

Sad to Report: Command Sgt. Major John "Top" Holland (Rolling Thunder co-founder and veteran of three wars); **Louis Adams** (host of a veterans'-based web site "Reflections of Viet Nam"); and **Bernie Williams** passed away since our last gathering at the Writers' Tent. Bernie and Louis supported the activities of the MDWP and at his last visit, Top Holland told us of his love and respect for the "little people" of the Central Highlands and I also remember the endearing poem (recited from memory) in tribute to his mother. Top joined the military at age 14. He was a veteran of WWII and he served three tours in Viet Nam.



Dick Morris was first at the open mic. Dick, a blogger, read his blog entry of April 29, 2011, "[A Skytrooper Moves On...](#)" "[Without A Song](#)," in memory of Col. Joseph Love, commanding officer of my unit in Vietnam, 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). He also sang the two songs he wrote for him as Battalion Songwriter: "We Are Saddled Up and Ready Col. Robbie" about Robert E. Lee, who commanded the 5th Cavalry in Texas before the Civil War, and "Saddle Up, Black Knights." (see <http://richardmorrisauthor.wordpress.com/skytroopers/lyrics/>) from his *Skytroopers* CD—songs he wrote while stationed in Vietnam in 1967-68.



Other songs included "Skytroopers," "Diggin' A Hole," "The Chaplain," "Bong Son Bridge," "Charlie," and "You Ain't Alone." From his novel *Cologne No. 10 For Men*, Dick read a portion of Chapter 9, "The Dancer," about the ambush in which Wilfred killed his first human being and Chapter 20, "Stewart and O'Shaunnessey," about the sudden death of Wilfred's platoon sergeant, an event that triggered PTSD in Chaplain Stewart, and perhaps in Wilfred himself.



Air Force Forward Air Controllers (FACs) **Jonathan Myer** and **Dave MacKay**, sang several times throughout the day. 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 and South Vietnam and the DMZ). The songs sung by our FACers are listed at the end of this report with information on how to obtain a CD.

Tom McLean served in Qui Nhon (II Corps) as an MP and was one of the early participants at the MDWP tent in 1993. Tom came with his wife and two grandsons, Chase and Cecil. Tom plays guitar, harmonica, and sings. Tom's first song, "Aging Veteran," is about a soldier near the end of his life, who tells his tale about war and its effects. Tom then sang "Conversation with Grandfathers," a mythical conversation with his Civil War ancestors about the state of veterans then and now. His Grandson Chase accompanied Tom on this one. Nine-year old Chase is curious about his family's military history. In his third song, "We Were There," Tom takes a look at how and why we ended up as soldiers in Vietnam. Tom's next song, "Living in Others Minds" reviews the life of a boy named "Eddie" from teenager to battle hardened soldier who now only lives in the dreams of others. Tom's last song "Flashes," is about the constant interruptions one can have from flashbacks. You can now hear many of Tom's songs at *The Poets Corner* of the MDWP web site: www.memorialdaywritersproject.com.



Mark Pankow read three selections, beginning with a new poem entitled "Martial Journey." The journey presents a rapid series of images that follow a soldier through enlistment, training, deployment, the personal toll of war, redeployment, and return to home and sweetheart. Mark's second poem was "For Those Who Also Serve." Mark wrote this poem at the request of his American Legion Post, to pay tribute to the family members and all others who support our military. It is a structured piece of rapid,



staccato images that hit like a snare drum or short bursts of automatic fire. For his last selection, Mark read a poem he'd finished the previous day, "Footsteps." The poem is about Memorial Day, honoring those lost, the enduring value of love of one's country and the willingness of patriotic men and women to give their lives in her defense. Below is a link where you can listen to songs sung by Mark's wife, Patty. The link includes two songs Patty sang at the MDWP tent during an earlier visit.

<http://airplaydirect.com/music/pattyreese/>



Loretta J. Aiken, RN, told us the inside story about Florence Nightingale, considered the Mother of Modern Nursing, who came to fame in the 1850s because of her writings about nursing during the Crimean War. Known as the "Lady With the Lamp," she remains a role model, mentor, and even advisor to other nurses in similar circumstances. Because of her work as a combat nurse, she still serves as a role model to nursing schools throughout the world, and modern nursing is based on her principles of nursing science. Loretta also spoke about the moments when two people meet--nurse and soldier--and how both lives are often impacted in the years to come.



Sistah Joy, a literary activist, presents poetry of conscience, poetry workshops and speaks to audiences on issues that contribute to personal and global peace through poetry. Sistah Joy offered three poems in tribute to all who serve and/or have served our country through military service. Her first poem, "I Remember" tells of the mythical father figure and the vacuum created when he doesn't return. Her second poem "Remembrances" reaches back to hug those who we lost and tells of the blessing we have in remembering. Her last poem, "I Proudly Wave the Flag" tells of the responsibility and obligation one carries in being true to the meaning of our flag.



Hope Spring. This is Hope's first visit to the MDWP tent. Hope read a poem entitled "My Grandfather's Story", about a WWII veteran from Tyro, Mississippi who was lucky and adjusted well to life after the war and was contrasted with another poem "My Uncle Van Louis's Story," who was saddled with flashbacks, hallucinations, and gut-wrenching pain. Both can serve as a positive lesson. Spring also made a video of her reading that will be available soon for all to see.

Maritza Rivera Cohen read several poems from her chapbook "A Mother's War." She read "Camouflage" a poem about the sights, sounds, and emotions as a group of veterans prepare for deployment overseas, "Semper Fi", a poem about receiving a son's last letter, and a poem in two voices with host Dick Epstein "Encounter: Two Voices" about a chance meeting between an Iraqi woman with her young child seeking safety and a U.S. Marine on duty,

Wayne Karlin served in the Marine Corps and is the author of ten books, both



fiction and non-fiction. His latest book is *Wandering Souls: Journeys with the Dead and the Living in Viet Nam* (Nation Books, 2009). Wayne read a Memorial Day tribute to Jim Childers, a fellow soldier who was reassigned to what would have been Wayne's last flight over Quang Tri. Jim took a bullet near Marble



Mountain while on an emergency mission and died on the operating room table an hour later.

Bocar Ba, President and Founder of African New Vision and senior engineer with Global SATCOM Technology, Inc. read a tribute to the Senegalese Tirailleurs, sharpshooters, who fought alongside the French in several wars including WW I, WW II, and in SE Asia. Bocar also read a poem he wrote to read at the MDWP tent about the circumstances of his father going off to war and how it impacted his family.



Ron Capps, Director of the Veterans Writing Project, was a soldier for 25 years and has spent time in with special operations forces in central Africa, a combat tour in Afghanistan, and an international peacekeeper in Darfur. Ron served as a Foreign Service officer from 1994-2008 with postings in Kosovo, Rwanda, Iraq and Sudan. Ron now works as a freelance writer and directs the Veterans Writing Project, a non-profit organization that provides no-cost writing seminars and workshops for veterans in the Washington area. Ron read a power piece from a memoir he is currently writing; a narrative about being diagnosed with PTSD while serving in Afghanistan and deciding whether to take medication or not and how his decision would impact his job and his career.

Holley Watts worked as a Donut Dolly with the 1st and 3rd Marine Amphibious Forces, DaNang, Chu Lai, An Khe, and Cu Chi). Holley joined us after activities at The Wall and shared a combination of her prose, poetry and story telling. She informed and entertained all those present at the MDWP tent with material that was funny, poignant, sad, and even ironic. She shared reflections from previous Memorial Days at The Wall, selections from her book, *“Who Knew? Reflections on Vietnam”* and other stories and narratives to become part of a yet-to-be-published book called, *“Mud Sox 'N Other Things.”*



Holley discussed her mother's greatest fear of her going to Viet Nam; the hilarious response from the men in an airport control tower in-country when they realized that it was an American WOMAN (with strong southern-belle accent) asking for landing instructions; and the difference between her expectations and the reality of her stateside cab ride home at the end of her tour. She also read a poem, “Bridging the Gap,” about her relationship with a corpsman she dated upon her return stateside, his departure for Viet Nam, how and when she dealt with his death and meeting his buddies and family.



Steve Scuba currently works with wounded veterans at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Steve told us of an encounter he has while in Iraq with a young female Iraqi patient who was distraught because she was told due to her injuries, she should not fast for Ramadan. To help ease the situation, Steve volunteered to fast in her place. The words used soon became a slogan, a bond, and battle cry of solidarity and pride.



Dattrinne Barker has been sidelined for a while and we're glad she returned to participate with us. Dattrinne read a favorite of mine "Taps" and several other poems about our veterans and war.



James Stewart (aka Tanker) came from Mudhole, Okalahoma to visit the Wall, to watch Rolling Thunder, and to spend Memorial Day with the MDWP. James sang a beautiful duet ("God Bless America") with a lady friend he met in front of the MDWP tent as well as "This Land Is Your Land," "Okie From Muskogee," "Pistol Packin' Mama," and several Johnny Cash tunes.



Clyde Christofferson read from a copy of *Your Hero and Mine, Scott*, a collection of letters written by his brother Scott, before his death near Chu Lai on October 8, 1967. Scott was a combat reporter for the 101st Airborne Division, and the unit he was with on that day got ambushed. This is an easy and insightful read by a young, inquisitive and objective soldier looking at the events of war.

Dan Rihn went to Vietnam in 1965 at the age of 19, as a member of Alpha Co. 1st Bn 26th Infantry part of the Big Red One. Dan told us about an interesting project he has recently undertaken. He is collecting stories from Viet Nam veterans that tell about what their lives have been like after their return home. I'm sending out a letter entitled "Life After Nam" written by Dan to tell you about his project. If interested, please email Dan at mdrski@gmail.com.



Jon Welsh is active in the local poetry scene. Ron shared the day with us at the MDWP Tent and read two poems. Jon's first poem, "Dogs of War," presents the thought that we as a nation may unleash the "dogs of war" perhaps because we cultivate and maintain the necessary resources to do so. The second poem, "A Solitary Dove," tells of the often less certain and tenuous path of peace. His third contribution, "O, Beautiful" laments military graveyards and presents both an idealistic vision of a world without borders and a pointed political critique of contemporary wars.

We, as artists of every persuasion, come to the MDWP Tent and the Wall to remember in our unique way and remember we do. The above is a fairly accurate recap of the day's activity at the Writer's Tent. 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 when the weather should be a bit cooler.

Jonathan and Dave's Song List

1. Answered: The 9-11 Call: Jonathan has been doing his "*Answering the 9-11 Call*" annually since October 2001 to memorialize the attack of that tragic day, promise retribution, and reaffirm the U.S.'s dual goals of "Freedom and Democracy in the world of Western Man." On May 1st of this year, that "9-11 call" was "answered" — by SEAL Team Six's raid on Osama bin Laden's refuge in Pakistan. "*Answered: . . .*" is the logical sequel. It's neither anti-Islam nor anti-Muslim — but it *is* anti-terrorist, and specifically anti-OBL . . . and it's good to know that "Allah" was on *our* side this past May Day!
2. "The Aging Pilot" (by JM) contrasts his early years flying jet fighter-interceptors "across the blue sky like a meteor's flash" with the inevitable changes that forty more years bring: ". . . I'm approaching my dotage, / My second childhood is well underway — " but just the same (and another year later), every day "on the right side of the grass" is a victory!
3. Beer Call in the Boonies: This is one Jonathan said he never thought he could write . . . but here it was: the true May 1966 story about how he combined a send-off meeting in Saigon with fellow-FAC John Perry (whose *Baron 82* callsign he inherited as John's replacement) — with the coup of transporting 20 cases of beer from Tan Son Nhut back to Kontum to break his FAC unit's drought. As the final couplet goes:
 ". . . we'd get pretty grumpy if we didn't get our mail
 And really pissed if we ran out of beer!"
John Perry had just left us this May 9th, so this ballad was *in memoriam*.
4. Ba Muoi Ba (by Barry Sadler). Barry tells how a Montagnard "striker" (many of whom populated the Green Beret A-teams in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam) likes his "33" beer a bit too much and winds up in a local jail. He calls for his Sergeant to bail him out . . . but — as he got into a fight down in Nha Trang, is complaining about the jail up at Da Nang, and thinks he's surrounded by V.C., he may not be ready for release . . . just yet. Presumably, the Sergeant is not amused.
5. Itazuke Tower A Korean War-era spoof that, as the FACeros do it) pits a P-51 pilot (Dave) — desperate to land his ailing airplane — 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!
6. Death in the Dak Na Valley (by JM). Jonathan's ballad reconstructed the fatal last flight of fellow-Kontum FAC Art Abramoff on 20 January 1967. Art was downed by ground fire as he was marking an enemy position some 20 klicks NNE of Dak To. The song integrates the accounts of FAC De Vere Henderson (who took control after Art's crash) and three of the two helicopters' four pilots who took part in the rescue attempt: Art was beyond help, but his backseat observer, an Army LT Hull, was rescued with severe injuries.

7. 58,000 Names Carved in a Wall (poem by Johnnie Rainwater; amended by Irv LeVine). This song captures the immensely powerful effect Maya Lin's "Wall" has had on Vietnam veterans and bereaved families alike, as they find the names of dead comrades and loved ones inscribed thereon. Irv's version substituted a numbers progression, from 50,000 to 54,000 to 58,000 names as the SEA War went on, with a final spoken line: "And there's 58 thousand, 2 hundred and 72 names . . . on that Wall" (as of 2011).

8. Reunion (by Toby Hughes). This is Toby's powerful paean to lost comrades and all others "who flew the skies of Southeast Asia": ". . . to Thud and Phantom and Skyraider . . . to Bird Dog, Jolly Green and Hun" — whose pilots and crews will "all meet at that final Great Reunion / And . . . fly with angels, out beyond the stars."

9. Green Fields of France (by Eric Bogle). Some time in the 1970s, an Australian song writer named Eric Bogle stopped to rest beside the grave of an Irish private soldier named William McBride, who was killed in France in 1916 while fighting in the Great War of 1914 - 18. Bogle started wondering about Willie McBride's life and his musings resulted in a song called the "Green Fields of France" or "No Man's Land." Dave MacKay led this song to pay tribute to the WW-I generation, in recognition of the passing of the last WW-I veteran a few weeks before Memorial Day.

10. Ho Chi Minh Trail (by Toby Hughes). The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a road network infested with anti-aircraft guns that ran the length of Laos just west of Vietnam. It was used as an infiltration route for supplies and munitions to support both NVA troops and Viet Cong militia in South Vietnam. FACs and fighters worked 24 hours a day, 365 days a year in all kinds of weather to find and destroy trucks coming down the Trail. It was difficult and dangerous work, especially at night and in marginal weather conditions. Dave led Toby Hughes's song to recall the mission and dangers in a way that those (like himself) who flew the Trail relate to . . . as being the way it was.

11. My Peace Song (by JM). Jonathan wrote this song after returning from the induction of his FAC school classmate "Willie" Wilbanks (KIA. MOH) into Georgia's Aviation Hall of Fame. As he noted at the time:

While cruising down I-95 [now eleven years ago] to attend fellow-FAC Hilliard A. "Willie" Wilbanks's inauguration into Georgia's Aviation Hall of Fame, I heard Brownie McGhee's butter-smooth guitar and Sonny Terry's chugging harmonica as they sang "Down by the Riverside." As the SEA War had been over for more than 25 years, I decided to write my own peace song and "study war no more" . . . **AFTER** I "lay down my Willie Pete" (marking rockets), "smoke grenade," "nape and snake" (napalm and high-drag 500-lb bombs), "CBUs" (cluster bomb units), and "20 mike-mike" (20-millimeter machine-gun fire) — "**Then** I'll study war no more!" Like Frank Warner's "Old Rebel Soldier" — "I won't be reconstructed, and I do not give a damn!"

12. The Misty Song (by Tony McPeak). Dave commemorated the “Misty” Fast FACs who flew two-seat F-100Fs at low altitude and high speed against the increasingly lethal ground defenses in Laos and North Vietnam — which 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.)

13. Stand to Your Glasses. A collective toast to lost comrades during the Great War, this sing 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 sing-along at military flyers’ songfests.

14. "Tchepone" (by Toby Hughes) In this, his best-known song (to the cantering tune of "Strawberry Roan") Toby laconically relates how he and his F-4C wingman were suckered into flying a strike on "Unsuspecting, peaceful Tchepone," a "hamlet" 350 miles to their northwest in Laos. They arrive overhead, come "screaming on down . . . for the kill" when — Surprise! Ground defenses strike back. He has to limp home with "six holes in my bird," a chastened flying cowboy indeed . . . but the Saigon Colonel with whom "he'd sure like a word" is nowhere to be found. The rueful lesson: "Oh, don't go to Tchepone."

15. Teak Lead. (as sung by Chip Dockery; tune "Red River Valley"). As Chip told it, "Teak" was a call-sign used by a succession of fighter-bomber flights going into harm's way (over North Vietnam) — and suffering so many losses that the Air Force "retired" that call-sign. The singer relates how his leader, “Teak One” (or “Teak Lead”), led his flight through bad weather and ground-to-air defenses — only to die as “he never pulled out of his bomb run.” The ballad ends as the singer briefs his own flight for the next day's mission . . . as “Teak Lead.”

16. Warrior Bards (by Irv LeVine + JM) Another of Irv's great songs, composed as an *homage* to those performing SEA War flying songs, from the great *Austin City Limits* show of 20 years ago to a few annual SOBA Flyers' Songfests. As Irv stopped at LBJ's death, Jonathan added a couple of verses to "finish the war" and also include three FACs (who, after all, told the fighter pilots where to go and what to do with themselves when they got there), and to give “credit” to those who contributed so much to the war's outcome: Hanoi Jane, Traitor John, and the Democrat-controlled Congress of the early 1970s that cut off the funds — after which 2 – 3 million more Asians were left to die.

17. “Willie” Wilbanks’ One-Man War (by JM). On 24 February 1867, Hilliard Almond Wilbanks was shot down near Di Linh in Lam Dong Province in the southern part of II Corps (South Vietnam’s Central Highlands) while warning a group of Vietnamese Army Rangers (and their U.S. Ranger advisors) of a well-prepared ambush by a larger North Vietnamese Army (NVA) force. With no fighters available (and Army helicopter gunships still a few minutes too far away), Willie fired all his rockets to warn the Rangers, then fired at the NVA with his M-16 until he crashed. By his sacrifice he saved an estimated 130 Rangers from sure death. Eleven months later, he was awarded the Air Force’s second (and first posthumous) Medal of Honor (MOH) of the Southeast Asia War.

18. 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 followed with the FAC variants, and both joined in on the choruses.

Anyone interested in learning more about combat flying missions during the Southeast Asia War and the songs that describe them, or where to find CDs or DVDs that document them — contact Jonathan Myer at:

<j-bmyer-alexva@erols.com> or <soba@erols.com>

The first address is best for Jonathan’s own two CDs (to date), plus info on other “Warrior Bards” performers’ own CDs, while the second is best for songs and performers on the three CDs produced from three annual Flyers’ Songfests sponsored by the Society of Old Bold Aviators (SOBA)

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. 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.

P.S. Your donations help pay for the rental of tent and equipment used on the Mall and to keep the MDWP going. The address for your donation is: Richard Epstein, 1024 Stirling Rd., Silver Spring, MD 20901.

