

Action Report: Memorial Day Writers' Project (MDWP)

Activity: A Tribute to our Veterans

Date: May 30, 2015

Location: Washington, DC

(Constitution Ave., and 20 St.) behind the sidewalk facing Constitution Ave.

Weather: Somewhere in the mid 70s (degrees), cloudless blue sky.

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*This is a draft report "under construction, as it were" and will be updated as additional source material is found.*

The memorial day Writers project again held its bi-annual open mic reading on the National Mall in Washington, DC. The following is a sampling of the many participants who stopped by the MDWP tent to share Memorial Day in tribute to those who serve. It was a perfect day. The sun was shining, the sky was blue and a breeze remained with us throughout day.

**Norah A. Burns**, Daughter of Vietnam Veteran along with her husband, daughter and son attended the 2015 Memorial Day Writer's Project Reading on Memorial Day this year sharing spirit, verse and appreciation for the sacrifice of soldiers near and far that we call dear friends and family.

Approaching her 10th year of sharing with MDWP, Norah revisited some of her original poetic favorites like "*Remembrance*", "*In The Land Of The Living*", "*Conflict*" all written in honor of her Father Donald Taylor, who served in 1969-1970 Da Nang, 37th Signal Battalion (Security) and 1970-1971 Ashau Valley, 101st Airborne (Infantry). She chased her old standards with a trio of new verse, "*Time In Service*", "*Legacy I*", and "*Of Ramadi*", that will undoubtedly become neo-classics. These new poetics were written in living honor and pride not only for her Father, Grandfather's and Uncles that served in wars passed, but also for her additional family members in service like the youngest of whom have more recently served numerous tours in Ramadi, Bahgdad (Camp Anaconda), Iraq and Bagram, Afghanistan, including her Cousin Jaworski Doucette.

**Janet Hagelgans** read a set of poems about some of her friends in uniform. She read "*Hantush, Iraq, 2003*" and "*First Kill*," poems about a tank crew and reconnaissance team in the Iraq War, and "*How Mike Weston Died*," about a Marine Corps major who served in the same conflict. She also read "*Eavesdropping on a Police Scanner During the Looting*," a poem about an officer from a small municipal police department who was deployed to Baltimore during the Freddie Gray riots.

**Diane Barker**, aka Datrienne, read several poems that were inspired by friends who served in Vietnam. She read "*The Secret Between Us*" and '*expose*' about friends who periodically gather and remember; and "*The Consolation Prize*" a poem that uncovers the disappointment and rejection that some feel as they navigate the afterlife of military service. Datrienne spoke about how in the sixth grade she learned about the military's "new" method of engagement in her "Weekly Reader" only to later make the connection between the methodology and its effect as her friends returned from service. Finally, she read "*Taps*" a poem that presents observations of those who survived and how their bravery held them together long after the war ended.

**Tom Glenn**. Tom told us of his escape from Saigon as the North Vietnamese were entering the city. He also read excerpts from his novel *Friendly Casualties* (2012) which was drawn from Tom's experience. Tom also read from another book to be published soon titled *The Trion Syndrome*.

**Dick Epstein** read several poems about his time in the coastal town of Qui Nhon, Vietnam. He read "*A Madam*," a poem about a young lady who gave him shelter; "*The Flower Next Door*," a poem about his next door neighbor; "*Living Arrangements*," a humorous recollection about a female roommate; and "*The White Rose*," a poem about a local watering hole in Vientiane, Laos.

**Dick Morris**, rifle platoon leader with A Co. 2nd Bn 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division in '67 and '68, sang tunes from his CD "Skytroopers," (lyrics can be seen at [www.vietwarsons.com](http://www.vietwarsons.com)). His CD is available at <http://cdbaby.com/cd/richardmorris> and read from his "*Cologne No. 10 for Men*," fiction that grew out of his songs and experiences in Vietnam. Details about the songs Dick sang are provided at the end of this report.

**Jonathan Myer** offered eight of his ballads in the morning, and was joined by Dave MacKay in the afternoon for another eleven; their songs are listed at the end of this report. Both men served as Forward Air Controllers (FACs) based in the Republic of Viet Nam (RVN)'s Central Highlands (II Corps). Jonathan flew the single-engine Cessna O-1E "Bird Dog," while Dave flew the Cessna O-2A "Super Skymaster" (aka "Oscar Deuce"). Jonathan's tour covered April 1966 to end-February 1967, mostly as a province or sector FAC in Kontum Province, but with a 3-1/2 week stint flying out of Dong Ha's Marine Corps air base (in I ["Eye"] Corps' Quang Tri province just below the Demilitarized Zone [DMZ]). Dave's tour spanned 1969, flying out of Pleiku Air Base (just south of Kontum) on then-secret operations to interdict North Vietnamese forces travelling south along the "Ho Chi Minh" Trail through Laos before turning east to infiltrate the RVN. Details about the songs Jonathan sang are provided at the end of this report.

If you are interested in Jonathan Myer's songs, those of the three (of five) military songfests recorded by our then-Society of Old Bold Aviators (SOBA), or other of his fellow "warrior bards" who had "been there, done that, and had the T-shirts" (etc.), contact Jonathon at at: [jbmmmyer@gmail.com](mailto:jbmmmyer@gmail.com).

**Sistah Joy**, a local community activist and performance poet, 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 read 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.

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**Dick Morris** sang the following songs interspersed with his readings.

1. "The Bong Song Bridge," about the time spent guarding a bridge in Binh Dinh Province.
2. "John Wesley," a 1st Cav point man who volunteered for point for an entire year and killed a dozen VC.
3. "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.
4. "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.
5. "Diggin' A Hole," about digging foxholes and sleeping holes, an activity soldiers performed daily all over Vietnam. This song received a finalist award in the Vocal Jazz & Blues category of the 23rd Annual Mid-Atlantic Song Contest in 2006 ([www.saw.org/masc.asp](http://www.saw.org/masc.asp)).
6. "The Chaplain" a song about a fictitious chaplain who leaves the field with battle fatigue. He dedicated it to the soldiers who come home with PTSD.
7. "I Got A Lonesome Me," a song about body parts (except one) that were lonesome
8. "Go To Sleep," a lullaby for his yet-to-be-conceived children. "Go To Sleep" is also on his daughter's CD, "Imagine That" (see [www.rickandaudrey.com](http://www.rickandaudrey.com)).

**Jonathan Myer** sang the first eight songs below; then Dave MacKay joined forces for the rest, mostly as duets but with a couple as solos to fill out the afternoon.

1. Teeny Weeny Bird Dog. (1997.) This was Jonathan Myer's first song since he had "DEROSed" from the RVN some 30 years before, in 1967. It's one of his *homages* to the incongruous little airplane that flew in all SEA environments, flown by all the Services in its several variations, valued for its flexibility and utility. For us Air Force FACs, its primary missions were visual reconnaissance (VRs) and control of air strikes, both Preplanned (based on intelligence) and Immediate (for fleeting targets and, especially, friendly troops in contact with enemy forces — TICs).
2. The Bird Dog Cannonball. (2015. *Tune: "Wabash Cannonball."*) Written 18 years later and to one of the most popular tunes for all sorts of moving "vehicules," this "brag" about his O-1E provides a final "bookend" to Jonathan's enjoyment of both the aircraft and its mission capabilities. Why "final"? Because with all his other songs featuring the Bird Dog, Jonathan says he's run out of themes.
3. "Bird Dog" Pilots' Heaven. (2001. *Tune: "Big Rock Candy Mountain," roughly.*) With each verse beginning "In 'Bird Dog' pilots' heaven. . .," one can anticipate the wishful thinking and exaggerated claims that will follow. Hey, after a few beers, no claim should be dismissed . . . unless it can be topped by one even more outrageous. (It works for fighter pilots, so why not for those of us FACs who told their fighters where to go and what to do with themselves when they got there?)
4. Tally Ho. (2002. *Tune: "Engine 143."*) "Tally Ho" was an operation but it soon reflected the area it covered, namely the (so-called) Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam, the "DMZ" containing the 17th parallel, aka Route Pack One. Jonathan got Tally Ho's

history (before and after his own brief tour) from Cal Anderson who, with John Hanna on a night mission (and in Jonathan's O-1E, yet!), was hit by an errant F-4. They had an interesting time landing it safely. "Crazy Charlie" Morrison, who said he got his nickname from flying beneath trees looking for targets, was in the audience. Between his loss of a few feet of wing and Jim Kerwin's landing with his aileron cable shot away, Jonathan did not consider the mere *near-severance* of his own aileron cable worthy of inclusion.

5. Warrior Bards (+ Our War). (1998/2015. *Tune: "Waiting for a Train."*) What began as "Yodelin' Irv" LeVine's tribute to his fellow singer-songwriters induced Jonathan to add progressively more verses to chronicle how and why our "Vietnam War" ended — with military victories squandered by social and political pressures to end the war no matter what. While the return of (most of) the "Hanoi Hilton" POWs signalled the war's end for the U.S.A. and its allies (punctuated by the Congress's denial of further funds), North Vietnam's total violation of the "Paris Accords" led to its conquest of South Vietnam two years later. What President Reagan later called "a noble cause" that bought time for other nations to put down their own communist insurgencies — also validated the "Domino Theory," as both Laos and Cambodia also fell to their communist foes . . . with a total loss of Asian lives estimated at an additional 2-to-3 millions . . . with little notice by most of a U.S. of A. that had become too introverted to care. \*

6. Beer Call in the Boonies. (2010. *Tune: "Little Old Sod Shanty."*) This ballad comprises the actual story of Jonathan's May 1966 trip from Kontum to Saigon where Jonathan saw the Saigon Commando who inspired his wishful fantasy of 1997, "FAC Meets Saigon Commando." As he tells it, "Beer Call" was "one of the songs I didn't see how I could write — until I did it": planning to bring beer back to Kontum to break its FACs' "drought"; his readiness to cut his taxi-driver's throat at the first sign of an ambush; his dinner with John Perry, the Cagey 82 whose call-sign he inherited; buying his first 35-mm and Super-8 movie cameras; the joyful welcome he received upon returned to Kontum with 20 cases of beer; and the retrospective recognition of what was really important to those in a combat theater — mail from home, and a steady supply of beer!

7. Coyote Four-One. (1990.) FACing over the DMZ had its moments of excitement and humor, but also tragedy . . . and ultimate revelation. Tally Ho missions were scheduled around the clock, weather permitting, and this sortie was a night flight, with an FNG ("fairly new guy/or gal") in Jonathan's back seat. As he tells it, "I was controlling 'Coyote' flight, a pair of two-seat F-4Cs, and Coyote 41 misjudged their altitude on an attack pass and plowed a fiery furrow into the ground. The F-4's final transmission, "Oh, shit!" (he learned later) was typical of flyers when they realize at the last moment that they are doomed. His discovery of their names on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial (30 years later) was enabled by Mike "Loadhacker" Sloniker, the Red River Rats' expert on "The Wall," who told him how to match dates of death (October 13, 1966, in this case) with names on the Wall and their details in the VVM's directory.

8. Frankie and Johnny (Air Force style). (2005. *Tune: "Frankie and Johnnie."*) "After attending several funerals at Arlington National Cemetery, I thought it would be a challenge to change the song's protagonists to an Air Force setting for Johnnie's philandering and Frankie's revenge — culminating in a full military funeral . . . which had its own challenges (some of them "cleaned up" in current practice). As for Johnnie's fighter squadron's flippant reaction?

The squadron gave Frankie Johnny's coffin flag, Threw nickels on the grass,  
Sang "*Hallelujah, let's head for the bar, 'Nuther fighter jock lost his ass!*"  
*He was her ma-an — till he done her wrong . . .*  
*He was her ma-a-a-an — till he done her wrong!"*

Well, “ya gotta expect losses in a big operation. . . .”

9. Come and Join the Air Force. (Pre-WW2 & on. *Tune: “Son of a Gambolier.”*)

According to C.W. “Bill” Getz, editor of *The Wild Blue Yonder: Songs of the Air Force*, several verses to this song emerged, from Army Air Corps days through conflicts fought by the U.S. Air Force and from several theaters. Dave MacKay led this version, with harmonies attempted by Jonathan. Its basic theme is that, while flying is great in every way, a lot of bad things can happen — but (per the chorus) “you will never mind.” Fortunately, neither Dave nor Jonathan had experienced any of the song’s itemized disasters . . . or they wouldn’t have been around to sing of them.

10. Raven FACéro. (*Tune: Limerick songs.*) As “Raven Jim” Roper said to Dave MacKay and Jonathan when he taught them this song, one of several out of his Ravens’ Songbook, “there isn’t a single dirty word in this song.” However, fanciful as the lyrics are, they do reflect the risks run and potential penalties of incautious promiscuity — a lesson the three of us kept in mind when we were performing as the Three FACéros for a couple of years in the first decade of this millennium.

11. FAC and the Green Beret. (1967. *Tune: “Wabash Cannonball.”*) Jonathan wrote this song as the finale on a tape of all the dirty songs he (then) knew. He then made copies for his roommate Lee Goettche (“Getchee”; Cagey 83) and all the Green Beret A-teams in Kontum and Pleiku Provinces, which comprised the 24th Special Tactical Zone in view of their proximity to the Tri-Border area where the RVN adjoined both Laos and Cambodia. The song includes several facts . . . woven into a spoof whereby a snotty FAC and anxious Green Beret radio operator seek fighter support when the A-team patrol comes under fire. A couple of years later, Green Berets and their “Walt” FACs would sing their respective roles at Nha Trang’s military club — a fact Jonathan didn’t learn until 1995. The song remains the favorite of some Viet Vets today.

12. My Peace Song. (2001. *Tune: “Down by the Riverside.”*) While on the way to MOH recipient Hilliard A. “Willie” Wilbanks’s inauguration into Georgia’s Aviation Hall of Fame, Jonathan says he found a PBS station playing “Riverside,” accompanied by Brownie McGee’s “butter-smooth guitar” and Sonny Terry’s “chugging harmonica.” When I get home, Jonathan thought, I’ll have to write my own “peace song.” Which he did — except all the frustrations of a war the U.S. needn’t have lost found their way into the lyrics. Only after avenging all the failures and setbacks, “Then I’ll study war no more”!

13. “Willie” Wilbanks’ One-Man War. (1997. *Tune: “Jesse James.”*) Starting from Willie’s posthumous MOH citation, Jonathan researched his FAC School classmate’s final mission. That day’s conflict emerged as a sequence of complexity but Willie’s heroism and sacrifice were indisputable: with fighters still distant and Army helicopter gunships still minutes away, Willie, who had spotted the enemy ambush awaiting what would be their third massacre of the day, determined to alert the friendly force — a unit of Vietnamese Army Rangers and their U.S. Army Ranger advisors. He first fired his smoke rockets from his O-1 “Bird Dog” until they were gone, then began firing his M-16 rifle out of a side window. The enemy, having lost the element of surprise, both charged the approaching Rangers and fired at Willie’s aircraft. On his third pass, he was seen to lose control and crashed inverted. Initial attempts to rescue him were driven off, but when his ALO (Air Liaison Officer) could cover a friendly helicopter, Willie was pulled out of the wreckage and transported to the hospital facility at Bao Loc; he died on the way. It was estimated that his actions not only killed enemy but saved 130 friendly lives.

14. I Fly the Line. (1969. *Tune: Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line."*) Dave MacKay wrote this song during his tour as Covey 536, an out-country FAC flying the O-2A Super Skymaster out of Pleiku Air Base during 1969. His mission was to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos. His song, however, tells the general story of how a FAC did his primary job of visual reconnaissance and airstrike control during the SEA War, whether he faced small arms fire (which "I don't sweat") or automatic crew-served weapons (which was "what I fret"). The end of his second verse, "I'll fly and fight anywhere at any time / Because they're mine, I Fly the Line" reflects the close relationship between FACs and the ground units they supported.

15. Stand to Your Glasses. The modern version began with Royal Flying Corps pilots flying in France during the Great War of 1914 – '18, and toasting their fallen comrades. Early combat losses sometimes required maintenance personnel to come to the Officers' Mess to teach newcomers the words. The verses we learned from Chip Dockery and Dick Jonas included a section from "Boozin' Buddies," a related song, before returning to a final chorus. The only significant change since has been to recognize the fact that women now also fly combat missions. Accordingly, we have changed the last line of the chorus — "And here's to the next *man* to die" — to ". . . the next *one* to die." Combat flying is, after all, an "equal opportunity" environment.

16. Sycamore Tree. (1968/69) Dave said he wrote this song before he even got to Vietnam. His "Sycamore Tree . . . straight and tall" represented the U.S., while he refers to the Republic of Viet Nam (RVN), tongue-in-cheek, as a "friendly little country" run largely by our mutual enemy, the Viet Cong (VC); as such it was a "thorn in the side" of the U.S., which throughout the 1960s refused either to empower our military to pursue a more aggressive strategy or to withdraw from an increasingly unpopular war. The VC (aided and eventually supplanted by the North Vietnamese Army, or NVA) carried out a steady campaign of terror against the RVN's infrastructure, thus to control its people — as typified by "five men dead . . . lying in the shade of the Sycamore Tree." Although Dave finishes with "And we've been there, you and me," his original words before going to Vietnam himself were "And it's waiting there for you and me" — to reflect the fact that, whether as volunteers or draftees, most young American men faced the prospect of being sent there.

17. Dear Ma'am. (1969.) Dave says he wrote this song early in his tour at Pleiku, after a mission that could have proved fatal. Had he been killed, he imagined the sort of bland patriotic letter that would have been sent to his family, and thought that such a letter ought to tell the plain truth about what had happened to him — hence the blunt "Dear Ma'am . . . your son is dead, he bought the farm today" — followed by the bald details of a hypothetical fate. Dave's song (sometimes titled "Dear Mom") was adopted widely for its "black humor." While Dave had written it for his O-2 "Oscar Deuce" and its typical mission, the "Nail" FACs (flying the OV-10 "Bronco" out of Nhakon Phanom, Thailand) modified its ending for their airplane . . . and added a raucous finale for emphasis.

18. 58,000 Names Carved in a Wall. Jonathan says: This memorial to The Wall has become our hymn to what it stands for. Our version is based on the lyrics by Jamie O'hara ("50,000 Names")# and its musical rendition by the late George Jones. I first heard it when Irv LeVine sang it during our Society of Old Bold Aviators (SOBA) concert at the Red River Rats' annual reunion in D.C.'s Downtown Marriott Hotel in 2005. However, Irv increased the names from 50,000 to 54,000 to 58,000 to end with the higher number estimated at the time. I immediately knew what he was doing, but when I researched the official number in Jan Scruggs's website, I found a different total. Since that time I have progressively raised the final line's spoken total to

match any further additions made at each year's Memorial Day ceremony. For 2015, the number was increased from 58,300 names to 58,307.†

19. Reunion. (© Toby Hughes. *Tune: "The Great Speckled Bird."*) This is Toby's homage to his fellow-flyers who "rode the thunder" as their "machines took wing in anger" to "try and stem the dark oppressing tide" of VC and NVA assaults in the South and the ambushes by MiGs and Triple-A gun and SAM defenses over the North itself. When he was active on the Red River Rats' "CasBar" net, he'd post annually the names of 58 KIAs during his F-4C tour in 1968 – '69, the deadliest time of our war. In "Reunion," he offers a toast to "Thud and Phantom and Skyraider / And here's to Bird Dog, Jolly Green and Hun" (the F-100) — the aircraft that played the widest roles at the time — and concludes: "We'll all meet at that final Great Reunion / And fly with angels, out beyond the stars."

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\* Lewis Sorley's *A Better War* documents the post-Westmoreland conduct of the war, its less-known second half, under GEN Creighton Abrams, whose "Vietnamization" of the war (coupled with "Linebacker 2" airstrikes against the heart of North Vietnam, specifically Hanoi itself and Haiphong Harbor) . . . went for nought when the NVA resumed their assaults after our forces had left. On their second attempt (in 1975), the South collapsed and Saigon fell.

# See <<http://www.metrolyrics.com/50000-names-lyrics-george-jones.html>>

† For the latest 7 names, plus 5 more changed from MIA to KIA (on Mother's Day this time), see: <<http://www.vvmf.org/news/article=Ceremony-on-Mothers-Day-will-honor-seven-name-additions-five-status-changes>>

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Thank you to all of you who participated and to those who help sponsors MDWP activities on the Mall. Special thanks to VVA 227 for their support. Our best wishes to our brother **Briah "Gunny" Conner** .

If you have any suggestions for corporate sponsorship, let me know. Don't forget to visit our website: [www.memorialdaywritersproject.com](http://www.memorialdaywritersproject.com) or contact me at [www.dick\\_epstein@hotmail.com](mailto:www.dick_epstein@hotmail.com). God Bless.

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. P.S. Your donation is most welcomed to help pay for the rental of our tent on the national Mall and to keep the MDWP going.