

Action Report

Subject: Memorial Day Writer's Project (MDWP)

Activity: Song, Poetry and Prose on the Mall

Date: Nov 11, 2004

Location: Washington, DC

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

Weather: Clear sky,

Temperature High 60's.

Nov 11, Day 1

Fellowship, heartfelt, relaxed, funny, sad, episodic. These are some of the words that come to mind as I think about the Memorial Day Writer's Project and its open venue on the Mall.

The MDWP tent was erected when I arrived and the setup crew was nowhere to be found. They picked a better spot than that assigned by the U.S. Park Service. Doug Bergman, a newcomer, was there early and helped install the banner, made some adjustments to the tent, and dedicated 3 chairs for the donuts he brought. Briah Conner soon appeared and went to work greeting everyone who hesitated for a moment as they tried to figure out who we are or what we do.

We heard from two singing forward air controllers (FACs), grunts, a marine, two Army communication techs, a medic, a med-evac chopper pilot, an MP, nurses (male and female), a Red Cross worker from Australia, and a homegrown Donut Dolly. We captured most of the readings on video thanks to Cathy Solomonson who operated the VHS camera. Special thanks to Cathy for moving a Marine from standing in front of the camera and for remembering that the camera has a zoom control. Maybe next time, we'll remember about the volume control.

**Jonathan Myer** and first-timer fellow FAC, **Jim Roper**, started off with harmonized renditions of *Jolly Green* (sung to the tune of Abline), *The Old Pacific Sea* (An Aussie favorite place for throwing up); *The Draft Dodger Rag*, and *Glory Flying Regulations* (a post WW II song updated for the Vietnam war. Jonathan flew an O-1 "Bird Dog" in Kontum Province and the DMZ and Jim flew an O-1 and O-2, as a Ravan and Covey FAC flying out-of-country missions.

Jonathan and Jim sang two more times throughout the day and helped get us back to a lighter note with *Dear Ma'am, Your Son is Dead* (to the tune of ??????????); *The Dumbest Thing a Flier Can Do*, *Mission to Mong Bak*, (a Special Forces Camp in I Corps), Jim Roper's *I'm a FAC* (to the tune of *Has Any Body Seen My Girl?*); a song written by F4 pilot Tony Hughes (*I Have*) *160 VC in the Open*; *An Occurrence at Dong Pak*; *Pink Elephant Polka*, a peace song (to the tune of *Down By the Riverside*), *Landing IFR* (Instrument Flying Rules) landing through buffalo shit kicked up by the wheels of Jonathan's O-1. They also sang Covey FAC Dave Mackay's, *I Fly the Line* (to the tune of John Cash's *I Walk the Line*). Jonathan's final song was *That Standard Form One-Eight-Oh*, about a Presidential candidate who wouldn't release his military records. When Jonathan and Jim sing, you have to smile. Next time I'm going to ask Jonathan to bring song sheets, so we can sing with him.

The audience listened attentively to repeat customer **Gerald Ney** (Aerial Surveillance Officer 68/69 and OIC of the Interpretation Section LZ English, and now VVA Pennsylvania State Council Chaplain) as he read *Leaf Rider*, a view of the war from a chopper, *Haunted Dreams*, based on the 22nd anniversary of the fall of Saigon, and *In Memory of Skip*, a good friend. Gerry also read a new poem he wrote the night before, *Pass the Pipe and the Sugarcane*, *Please Go Light on the Shrapnel*. Choppers must have known he was reading about them because they tried to drown him out as he read.

**Dick Epstein** read one of Clyde Wray's poems, *I Want to Write*, two poems by **Mike McDonell**, *From the Wall*, and *Spade Cooly's Zap-Momma*. Mike recently read these poems on Veterans Radio.Net. Then Dick read a poem written by Doc Kane, *It's My Job*, and one of his own, *Feeling No Pain*.

**Doug Bergman** drove in early from New York to get some quiet time at the wall and read from his book in progress *The B'Hai* a spellbinding story of basic training and a B'Hai's refusal to shave. Doug introduced us to "The Grunts Toast" as we all drank from a can of cling peaches in heavy syrup (with embellishment)---a salute to all Grunts. Cathy reminded me about Doug's paintings— colorful original canvases on display (so everyone had full frontal nudity as a backdrop while they read— a first for our tent at the Nation's capitol. Doug was a Combat Platoon Leader with the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 327, 101 Airborne, Phu Bai.

**"Doc" Kerry Pardue** 68/69 755 Medical Detachment, Pleiku; 8<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment, Ban Me Thuout; Scouts, 2/47<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Bihn, Phouc, read several very poignant poems. You can tell by his titles. *Every Day is a Memorial Day; Another Hot LZ; I Was Your Nurse, You Were My Patient; Where Am I? You Forget, I Cant; Playing Chicken with Mortars; In the Heat of Battle; Where Are the Children; and Wrong Place, Wrong Time*. Kerry also participated in the Nurses program. This was Kerry's second time with us and we hope he'll become a regular.

**Bob Kyle** (a new guy from New Hampshire) joined us with his wife. Bob was with the 36th Evac in Vung Tau. He read several excerpts from his book, *The Fifth Season*. It looks like a sensitive and intelligent read and it's toward the top of my reading list. Bob, we hope you come back and read with us again.

**Bruce Curley** lost his mom and a fire consumed his house this past year. I always learn from Bruce. He has something to say and he says it well (with clarity, precision, and insight). Here are some of the poems he read: *To Stretch a Potato*, a tribute to his mom and a statement of character and values; *I Am a Serbian Sniper*, a warning of the new world order; *This Broken Silence*, a poem about life and liberation of a WWII concentration camp, love and life; *Screaming Like a Banchee*, a poem about reaction to unrest in the Curley household and war; *World Event, Moving On*, about the impermanence of things, and an old favorite of mine, *Future Dust*, a lesson learned from Air Force Officer's School, and *Viet Nam is...*

I have to mention the frail, smiling elderly Korean veteran appended to two large American and Korean flags, yelling at the top of his voice, asking for the veteran's book of the living. He was patient at our inability to understand him. I think he found us all amusing. We sent him to the Marines tent next door.

And another bright and cheery note, Australian Red Cross worker **Jean Debelle Lamensdorf** read with us. She started by chasing off several noisy Harleys that were revving loudly nearby. All I know is, she yelled at them and they left. Maybe it was coincidence, maybe it wasn't. Jean worked at the 36th Evac at Vung Tau and the 93<sup>rd</sup> Evac at Long Binh. She started out by reminiscing about her introduction to Viet Nam. She told us of a puritan Col. Honeycutt and the cause and resolution of blocked toilets in at her billets, about Stumpy-- a VC POW patient from the battle of Long Tam that she got to know pretty well. Cathy and Jean got into a surprising conversation about Aussie troops and the creative application of tattoos. Jean has a book coming out in the Spring 2006 to be published by Random House. She read several delightful excerpts relating to life at Chu Chi, Pleiku, Bear Cat, Ben Hoa, Parrots Beak and Vung Tau. I have three copies on order. The title, TBD, may be *Jean*, *Jean the Sex Machine* or *She Always Wore Perfume*. Welcome Jean!!!

**Kenneth Lee**, 1968, 3rd Battalion 9<sup>th</sup> Marines, I Corps, with his powerful and clear voice read *Bastions of War*, a piece about tenacity, loyalty, unselfishness, and pride; *Crises of the Mind*, a strong response to 9/11... about attitude and ideals; and what I call his signature pieces, *Letter From a Soldier (4<sup>th</sup> Colored Infantry Regiment, 1863)*; *I Once Breathed the Fire of Dragon*; *Marble Men*, a tribute to the fighting soldier, and another new favorite, *Dese Old Bones*.

**Holly Watts** read from her recently published book *Who Knew?* These are touching vignettes from a Donut Dolly assigned to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav at An Khe circa 66-67.

**Datrinne Barker** was with us once again. Datrinne read a new poem *Tiptoe Back to Convention*, a poem about growing up and maturing and a salute to her dead cousin in her fine poem entitled *Taps*.

**Joe Finch**, Med Evac Pilot, 25<sup>th</sup> Aviation Division, 1969, read from his book *Angels Wing*. Joe told a story about a young FNG who burned the shitter instead of its contents and an explanation for the sudden appearance of fresh meat served in baked pasta. Joe told us several humorous incidents about a fellow copter pilot, Randy Judge. Randy has a book entitled *To Nam and Back*. That too is on my reading list. I felt remiss for not asking for a moment in silence in tribute to all veterans and for those in harms way today, but Joe took care of that with his poem that asked us to:

Think about where we are at this very moment,  
listen to the sounds of the drum beats echoing across the years,  
the cannon's roar echoing across the years.  
Soldiers hear them all.  
Give thanks to those who gave up their tomorrows.  
Give thanks for those who won our freedom.  
Honor them. Respect them.  
Remember, freedom isn't free. (Paraphrased by me)

**John Haines**, fellow signal corps member attached to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, told of his 30-day trip by ship and then had to climb down the side of the ship for off loading at Vung Tau.

**Cathy Solomonson**, nurse at the 24<sup>th</sup> Evac at Long Bing, read one of her favorites, *Passing the Hat*, written by Vince Kaspar, a poem about donations (arms, legs, eyes) and how we are enriched and impoverished by our giving. Cathy sang a very touching *When Joanne Comes Home....So What? Who Cares?...* a tribute to a fellow nurse; and a poem touching on some of the many letters she opened as a member of the Vietnam Woman's Memorial Project. The letters were written from veterans who wanted to say thanks to the nurses who helped them; and *Slow Dancing at the 24<sup>th</sup> Evac*, a poem about flashbacks and slowly, carefully helping a blind patient out of bed.

I have to mention, not only did I meet and speak with 6' 5" General Rienzi at a 1<sup>st</sup> Signal Brigade reunion, I also met Lt. Gen Hal Moore and Joe Galloway. They were at a reunion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav in Crystal City. (Thank you Ken White for inviting me). It was a memorable Veterans Day. It always is. For those that couldn't make it, stay in touch and God bless.

Did I forget anyone? Probably, and for that I apologize. It was a day of remembrance, a day of compassion, accepting oneself and each other, frailties and all. Thank you all for sharing yourselves, for remembering and 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 on Memorial Day weekend or next Veterans Day.

To those who brought coffee, cider, donuts, muffins, and embellished fruit, we thank you (Cathy Solomonson, Doug Bergman, Bria Conner, and Bruce Curley. Thank you all for coming and sharing yourselves with us.

Hoa Binh  
Eppy1111@aol.com