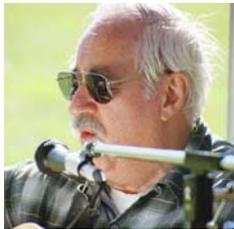


Action Report: 2005  
Subject : Memorial Day Writers' Project (MDWP)  
Activity: Poetry, Prose and Song  
Date: Nov 11 and 12, 2005  
Location: Washington D.C.  
(behind the sidewalk facing 20th Street and Constitution Ave.)  
Weather: Sunny, cool, slight breeze from the south

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We had wives of veterans, daughters of veterans, sons of veterans, and a veteran's mother who participated with us this year. We had two saxophone players, three veterans on guitar, and one on keyboard (all with their own original work). After an invocation from Chaplain Gerald Ney, MDWP co-founder and co-host Mike McDonnell spoke of the beginnings of the Memorial Day Writers' Project in 1993. We started with seven participants. Today, we had twenty-two participants and several veterans who couldn't be with us sent some of their work to share with us.

**Jonathan Myer** (O-1E pilot, II Corps '66-67), and first timer Dave McKay (O-2 pilot '69, AOP Laos) sang and played their often humorous renditions telling of true events in the life of a Forward Air Controller (FAC) in the skies of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. They have several CD's from their yearly concerts in the Washington area and I'm sure they would be happy to sell you one. Although most relate directly to events that took place over Laos and Vietnam, several of the songs originate in WWI and WWII. The FACs sang twice during the day. The following presents a combined listing of the songs they sang.



they sang.

Here is a listing of the songs they sang: "*Bird Dog*," "*Pilots' Heaven*" (Jonathan Myer) "*Close Air Support*" (Jonathan Myer) "*My Peace Song*" (Jonathan Myer) "*I Fly the Line*" (Dave MacKay) "*BUFF*" (Dick Jonas, for Bull Durham) "*160 VC in the Open*" (Toby Hughes) "*Dear Ma'am, Your Son Is Dead*" (Dave MacKay) "*Ho Chi Minh Trail*" (Toby Hughes) "*Jolly Green FAC and the Green Beret*" (Jonathan Myer) "*Stand to Your Glasses*" (a WWII song) "*Hello, Ashau Tower*" (aka The Ballad of Bernie Fisher) "*Answering the 9-1-1 Call*" (Jonathan Myer) "*Dumbest Thing*" (Jonathan Myer) "*Glory Flying Regulations II.*"

Doug Bergman manned his own table in the front of the tent and worked with USMC greeter Bria Conner inviting people to stop and rest for a while. Doug recently returned from Vietnam and started off by reading a page from a 1993 U.S. Senate POW Report to remind us about the courage and fortitude of our American POWs. Doug briefed us on the current situation in Vietnam in the area of Phu Loc and explained the rationale behind his bright-white, "memory shirt," his quest to know the names of those he visited, and about a little school between Da Nang and Hue he helped improve. From his new book "*Names I Can't Remember*" (ISBN 0-97-59177-1-4), he read about a Bahai—a recruit in basic training who refused to shave off his beard and about the realization and shock of a young squad leader in combat, forced to grow-up in a hurry.

**Tom McLean** (127th Military Police Co., Quin Nhon '67-'68) paid a surprise visit and sang several songs he wrote. Tom plays a harmonica as he strums his guitar Woody Guthrie/Bob Dylan style; only Tom is better. I'm not a fashion consultant, but I have to point out Tom wore the only "MDWP tee shirt in existence. It boldly displays the yellow, red and green MWDP logo (the colors of the South Vietnamese flag). Tom has a Kenney Rogers-like voice that only gets better with age. We were able to squeeze three songs out him. It's always a battle. He wants to sing less and the audience wants him to sing more. Tom sang "*We Were There*," "*A Song About a Wall*," and "*Tour's End*." I wouldn't mind being able to hear them all again.



Mike McDonnell introduced a friend we haven't seen in a long time: the new **Robert Hornocker**. Bob read with the MDWP about 10 years ago. He started with a tribute to Vince Kaspar, "*Just Call Me Hugs*." Vince passed away in 1995. It was Vince, who encouraged Bob and many other MDWP'ers to write. Bob also read "*Donuts, Laughter, and Practical Jokes*," a poem about a high school friend whose name is on the wall, and a poem about a Navy Corpsman serving in I Corps. I remember the last line: "Corpsman down! Damn it Doc, don't die on us now."

Mike read a poem sent to him by Barb Whitmarsh. For many years, Barb and her husband provided a place for Vietnam veterans to submit and publish their artwork and poetry in a wonderful anthology entitled "*INCOMING*." Here are the last few lines from her poem, "*MacArther Said*." "The young must yield to the old and the old must yield to the young; that's the natural order of life as it should be. Happy Veterans Day."

**Norm Lampert**, another veteran not seen for quite some time, minced no words in a poem he sent to Mike to read entitled "*Least We Remember*"— a poem that reminds us of the decisions, causes, and results of war. One of the last lines: "Some times, if you are really lucky, you forget for a while."



Mike read one of the first poems he wrote about a friend of his from Vietnam "*Magilla*" (McGill, J.P., Panel 20E, Line 105) and about an incident that took place while the French were there in 1952. "It's only Dinner." Listen to these lines: "Monkeys and Frenchman taste the same in the dark. There is no difference. It's only dinner."

**Ed Henry** paid a surprise visit and announced proudly that he is finally a grandfather! Ed mesmerized us with a talk he prepared to give at the Woman's Memorial on fatherhood and what it means as a veteran. Ed told of a recent tour he led in Vietnam for Ed Blecksmith of other members of Mike Co 3rd Battalion 5, Marines; the death of a Catholic Chaplain in Operation Swift in '67; and the concern of a veteran father for his son, who at that time was serving in Iraq, and the death of that son (J.P. Blecksmith, 2nd Lt. USMC, Iraq).



Ed was followed by first-timer **June Ellmar**. June told of her feelings as a mother sending both, a son and daughter off to war and offered a prayer for deliverance for all mothers and fathers. This was a real tear jerker folks. I couldn't speak when she finished. She seemed puzzled by so

many teary eyes. We are an emotional bunch. She played “*Let my People Go*” on her saxophone. Yes, it was a prayer.



**Gerald Ney** (pronounced Nie), Imagery Interpretation Officer (AOP LZ English/Bong Song), played off of Ed’s theme of a father’s concern for his son. Gerald took a look back at his great grandfather’s history in the Civil War and how his death in a prison camp impacted Gerald’s existence today. Gerald then read an autobiographical sketch of his tour on Vietnam, and a humorous poem explaining the art of circumnavigating the military supply system.

**Claudia Annis**, Sr. Editor of Vietnam Magazine, brought several sample copies of the magazine, a coupon for a reduction on the subscription price, and invited veterans to submit stories. Claudia read several poems written by veteran Robert L. Barth. The poems included “*A Letter from the Bush*,” “*Elegy for a Dead Friend*,” “*Definition*,” “*To Combat*,” and “*I Swore I’d Only be a Three-Year Cypher*.” The poems were from a book entitled *Deeply Dug In*, printed by the University of New Mexico Press.

**Jim Porter**, Green Beret, Can Tho ’63 (that’s delta country) sang a song about a 19-year old



looking for a “welcome home” that he and many other veterans did not receive, and told how it affected his outlook and those of his friends. Jim then sang “*What a Wonderful World*,” a song he sang at his wife’s funeral...and the tear ducts opened again. I didn’t get a chance to shake his hand or give him a hug; so publicly I say: Welcome Home Jim, and from the bottom of my heart, Thank you for being who you are.

First timer, **Paul Erba**, from the Fairfax-based poetry group, Poets Anonymous, told us of his grandfather, a WWI veteran; the recent funeral of his dad, a WWII veteran; his thoughts about war, and his concern for children as a parent. Paul read a poem about his father’s passing, “*The Sport Coat*,” and one he rewrote this morning about the defenders of Bataan and Corregidor.

An old timer, **Peter Saxman**, started off by reading a poem written by Vince Kaspar: “*Hugs*.”



Vince also encouraged Peter to start writing about 10 years ago. Peter then read “*Black Granite*,” a poem read at a VVA dedication ceremony near Philadelphia, a poem about the life of a medic “*Body Count*,” and “*Art Work*,” a poem that states no matter how beautiful man’s art work, what we create is pale and short lived when compared to nature.

**Norah Burns**, a veteran’s daughter, shared two new poems written about her father “*In the Land of the Living*” and “*Conflict*,” a poem dedicated to her dad and three cousins who are now serving in Iraq. Nora donated all of the money she made as a featured poet at the Nora (no relation) School in Silver Spring the evening of Nov 10th.



WWII veteran, **Dr. Paul Grayson**, served as a weather observer in the “Big One” in the Aleutians. Paul read a poem he wrote about the VJ Day celebration in Washington, DC. As Paul said, he literally and figuratively

takes off his hat to the artist-veteran's at the MDWP tent. For those of you in the Washington area, Paul is the featured poet in a classical program sponsored by Washington Musica Viva. The program includes Mozart, Schuman and Bruch at the gorgeous Ratner Museum, 10001 Old Georgetown Rd, Bethesda, MD. Nov 15th at 7:30. Tickets are \$20 at the door. Paul will be reading his own poetry in the voice of Old Testament characters.



I spotted a young man sitting in the audience with a guitar. He said his name was "**Raccoon**" and that he was mostly Cherokee. He sang a song he wrote, "Rainbow Warrior," which interesting enough incorporated an East Indian phrase (Om Shanti) loosely meaning, "I acknowledge the spirit within you." The song touches on the life of a young Indian confronting the storm of life, and moving on.

### **Nov 12, 2005**

In preparation of the second day, Raccoon, created and installed a more stable platform for our mike stands, repositioned the speaker to reduce the squealing of the microphones due to feedback, rearranged the chairs according to Feung Shuei principles, and slept in the tent to guard the chairs and equipment throughout the night.



**Gerald Ney** started off the second day with an invocation and was followed by Donut Dolly **Holly Watts** ('DaNang, Chu Lai, An Khe, Cu Chi, 66-67). Holly read "47W," a new poem about a vet locating a name for the first time on the Wall; "*Rolling Thunder*," a poem about her first ride as a biker babe; "*Mind Games*;" and another new poem "*Mud on a Fender*," a look at how words, events and people stick to us and how they impact us the rest of our lives. Holly also read from her book entitled "Who Knew?"

**Sharon Sinclair**, a Vietnam era veteran, was instrumental in starting a mentoring program for today's returning veterans. The program is called "Mission Welcome Home." Sharon read a beautiful poem written by the first veteran she help as part of that program. Unfortunately the veteran, a young woman, was KIA in Bagdad Nov 7, 2003.



**Nancy Smoyer**, recently spent several months immersed in the culture of New Orleans and told us of her experiences sleeping in cots in a gymnasium and in the local police station sleeping 6 people in a 4-person cell.

**Emily Strange** read of a departing party for a Col. about to leave Vietnam, incoming, and the tail fin of a mortar—a close call for Emily. She also read “*Stacy, He Was a Friend of Mine*” and “*Lottery of Death*,” a new poem about death and Iraq. Emily then picked a lighter track and told us a about Donut Dolly training and how polite navy personnel were on ships—especially when ascending and descending long, scary ladders.



**Cathy Solomonson** told of her arrival at the 24th Evac in Bien Hoa during a mortar attack.



Cathy read a poem she wrote based on letters read while helping develop the Sister Search database. This was part of the Women’s Memorial Project. The poem is titled “*Letters from Guys to the Vietnam Memorial Project*.” This was a great and humorous story. Then Cathy read something I don’t think we heard before: “*My Sacrificial Goat*.” This was a revealing image that told about preparation for duty in Vietnam using goats as practice patients. I have to repeat the last line of the poem. It’s out of context, but it’s good. “...so, do you think this goat gives a rat’s ass about how my eyebrows look?” Cathy then read, “*Passing the Hat*,” a tribute to our old friend, Vince Kaspar.



On the second day, Raven **Jim Roper** joined the FACS on keyboard. Jim served four tours in Laos and logged near 1,000 hours in small spotter planes over Laos. Sung in the true Air Force tradition, the songs are colorful and memorable. Jonathan, Jim, and Dave sang:

Raven FACero [rhymes with "vaquero"]  
Draft Dodger Rag [Korean War song]  
Teak Lead Reunion (Toby Hughes)

The Old Pacific Sea [Australian song]

Throw a Nickel on the Grass

Pull the Boom from My Gashole (Dick Jonas)

Laid Around Vietnam Too Long

Different Missions (Bill Rothas)

On their second set, Jonathan Myer, Jim Roper, and Dave McKay sang:

How I Went IFR in Flying Buffalo Shit (Jonathan Myer)

D-Day Dodgers [WW-II, "Lili Marlene"]

Last Flight (Jonathan Myer)

Your "Flying Special (Jonathan Myer)

Saigon Warrior Young Covey Yankee Air Pirate (Dick Jonas)

Little Old Oscar Deuce" (Dave Mckay)

The Wall" (Jim Roper).

Then our new friend “**Raccoon**” took to the stage with guitar and sang, “*When I was Young*,” an autobiographic sketch about the need to move on. I think it was a combination of several of his songs. I thought he decided to break his guitar strings, but it turned out to be a song entitled “*I Like to Sit and Think About What I Like to Sit and Think About When I’m Thinking. Don’t Stop Me Now, I think I’m thinking.*” Next line: “I think God is a vacuum cleaner and I’m his heavy shag” (This must be an old Cherokee song). He went on to tell us a little about the “wind talkers” and how they communicate. He quoted a Cherokee prayer to our future ancestors and then he sang “*Buffalo Road*,” a spiritual journey: “...my feet are burning and the stars are hard to reach on the buffalo road. Listen to the thunder, look into the flames. There we go, down the buffalo road.” He then sang another song from his CD “*We’ll be Dancing when Daylight Comes.*” He is a talented songwriter, pretty good on the guitar, and a likable voice.



**Briah Conner** read two poems he recently received from our Canadian poet and playwright, Clyde Wray. The poems were: “*Nov 11, 2005, Another Veterans Day, Thank You*” and “*Voices That Won’t Be Silenced.*” Before we broke up Gerald Ney read “*Marching on O.J and Tabasco.*” This is a look back at the rigors of basic training and the food we ate. He also read “*China Beach*,” a different place, same war. In this poem, Gerald contrasted life at China Beach to that of Firebase English.



**Conclusion.** To all of you I say: Thank You for your friendship, thank you for sharing yourselves, and thank you for remembering and telling others about Vietnam and the fruits of war. As Raccoon said when I shook his hand to say goodbye: “Thank you for being part of my life.” I hope to see you on Memorial Day.

If you want your photo standing at the microphone, let me know.

Books you should know about:

Bergman, Douglas R. *Names I Can’t Remember*, Warrior Books, 357 pgs. ISBN O-97-59177-1-4.

Roper, Jim. *Quoth the Raven*, America House Book Publishers, 291 pgs. ISBN 1-59129-051-1.

Finch, Joseph. *Angel’s Wing, A Year in the Skies of Vietnam*, 154 pgs. ISBN 0-9109155-45-3.

Watts, Holly. *Who Knew? Reflections on Vietnam*, 104 pgs. ISBN097-40585-2-1.