
Action Report

Subject: Memorial Day Writers' Project (MDWP)

Activity: A Tribute to Veterans

Date: Nov 11, 2007

Location: Washington, DC

(Constitution Ave., behind the sidewalk facing 20th Street)

Weather: Few clouds, 53 degrees, a light breeze.



This year was the 25th anniversary of the Wall. There was a week-long tribute to veterans featuring concerts, panel discussions, poetry readings and a parade from 7th St to 20th St. There was substantial representation from the Vietnamese community, Vietnamese soldiers in uniform (they actually marched), Vietnamese associations, Native American Veterans, ROKS, USAF Perimeter Security personnel (with K9s). I marched with 200 to 300 members of the 1st Signal Brigade. The Cav, USMC, USN and USA units were also well represented. I've provided some photos in a second email if you would like to take a look.

The MDWP had eighteen participants who read, played and sang of sons and lost friends, of air strikes and firefights. Australian Red Cross worker, Jean Lamensdorf, served as our one woman welcoming committee as she set up shop to sell copies of her award-winning book *Write Home for Me*. Brenda Myer took care of book sales and the information/display table in Jean's absence. The MDWP photo album seemed to be a big hit as veterans turned each page to show their wives, their children and grand children photos of Vietnam.

Tom McLean (a cross between Bob Dylan and Arlo Guthry, and Willie Nelson) started us off with several of his original songs: *The Tour's End*—about a soldier's mixed emotions as he boarded the freedom bird—leaving a job unfinished and his friends; *Living Only in Others' Dreams*—a brave pretender, a wannabe soldier who is finally called to serve and doesn't make it back. "Now he lives only in others' minds. He's on his mother's all the time. A short life that ended up in others' dreams;" *Spirits of the Wall*—"touch them, taste them, feel them, see them. They're in the Wall. They are the Wall. Their spirits are the Wall." In a song titled, *We Were There*, Tom sings:



"We went because we'd never turn our backs when we were called
We went because we couldn't let someone else take the fall."

Tom plays guitar, harmonica and sings (all at the same time). Tom also read a poem *Beaucoup Dinkey Dau* (a description that would fit many of us). Tom also participated with us back in 1993. Welcome back Tom! It's great having you with us and we hope you join us again.



Next up was poet Judy Gorman King, from TN. Judy participated in the music and poetry tribute to veterans held throughout the week. She read: *The Spirit of the Wall*—a young soldier frozen in time converses with an ageing veteran who came with his family to visit the Wall; *Hers' Was the Last Face He Saw*—a poem dedicated to the eight nurses whose names are engraved on the Wall; *She is a Gold Star Mother*—a sensitive look at the proud, nurturing character and strength of a soldier's mother. Judy left copies of two other poems with us: *The Letter*—a letter written to Uncle Sam from a 10-year old, who wants to go to Vietnam to play ball with his Grandpa; and *Silver Haired Warrior*—a thoughtful look at today's graying bikers and the meaning behind Rolling Thunder.

Tom Yarbough was also captured from the music and poetry tribute to veterans held throughout the week. Tom worked in the Delta as a River Rat ('67) and hails from Jupiter FL. Tom played several original songs from his CD *War Torn Years*—a tribute to combat veterans. Profits from Tom's CD sales go to

www.usveteransmatter.org. The organization was formed to help wounded vets. His song "Jenny" (a real tear jerker) is featured in the documentary short film *Small Acts of Kindness* and can be viewed at Tom's Web page

<http://www.tomyarborough.com>. Tom's music is also featured in the films *Wounded Walking* and *War Torn Years*. Tom sang *Mary and Fred*, *Curious Mind*, *Hope is the Answer*, *Wounded Walking*, *That's Just the Way That it Was*, *Haunting Eyes* and several others. Each title is a self-contained story with lyrics that touch your heart. I did a Google search and found Tom's voice pouring out from <http://www.musicforte.com/member/tomyarborough>. Tom says his style has been influenced by Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie and Leonard Cohen. Tom is also a novelist and playwright.



Holly Watts (Donut Dolly, 67/68, 3rd Marine Amphibious Forces, Chu Chi, DaNang, An Khe, and Phu Bai) read from her delightful chapbook *Who Knew? Reflections on Vietnam and Mud Sox and Other Things*, which is filled with poetry and remembrances of the girl next-door visiting soldiers in a place called Vietnam. Holly read *Mail Call*, *Mind Games* and *Where Can I Find Them*—this last poem is about the many faces and nicknames that can't be found. Proceeds from Holly's chapbook help support the production of a soon-to-be-released documentary entitled "A Touch of Home: The Vietnam War's Red Cross Girls." Ask her about it. Holly can be reached at hollywatts@yahoo.com. Holly also participated at the Veterans Day activities as a speaker at WIMSA on Veterans Day. The photo depicts Holly, Cathy Solomonson and friend.



R. K. Mitby read with us for the first time this year. R.K. served in the 1st Cav and read *A Matter of Conscience*—a poem about two friends, one went to Canada and one went joined the Peace Corps. R.K. asks who was right, who was wrong and who was being used; *War Games*—a poem about a sports official whose mind wanders back to Vietnam during the game; *Crossings*—a poem about the obstacles and events we overcome throughout our lives; *Staples*—about keeping quite about what one see and feels; and *A Mystery to Me*—about readjusting to life back in the world.

Mark Pankow served in the Army from '72 to '97. Mark started as a private and retired as a dual-branched MP and Conterintelligence LTC. Mark's brother is currently serving in Afghanistan. Mark's first poem, *Broken*, was written for his brother's A-Team weapons' sergeant, whose son died of heart failure at 15 when he stepped off a ride at Disneyworld. The second poem—*For Those Who Also Serve* was written as a tribute for Mark's American Legion Post. Mark is active in the local Washington area poetry scene.





Lou Barnett was with the 1st Mar Div. in Da Nang (69-70). Lou currently serves as a pastor somewhere in Michigan. Lou sang *Freedom Isn't Free, When you are a Soldier, Proud to be an American*; and the *Story of Belleau Woods*. This last song tells the WWI story of when German, French and American forces stopped fighting to play kick ball and sing *Silent Night* before returning to the task of killing each other; and *You're a Hero to Me*—dedicated to all returning veterans. Lou brought his son, Patrick, and we were glad to have them with us.

Odessa Walker came to us from the *Poet Connection*, a Prince George's County poetry group. Odessa had her two young daughters in tow and read several of her original poems. Odessa is a West Point Graduate. Odessa dedicated several poems to four women from the Naval Academy and West Point, who lost their lives in Iraq. *Semper Fi*—dedicated to Jennifer Harris, a 2000 graduate of the Naval Academy; *Tic Toc*—dedicated to 1995 Naval Academy graduate Megan Macomb; and *Our Little Girl*—a poem for 2003 West Point Graduate, Laura Walker. Odessa also has a CD filled with marvelous poetry and two new chapbooks *Red, White and Blue* and *Why Should I Pray?*



By this time, gracefully aging Forward Air Controller (FAC) Jonathan Myer was ready to



get into the act with his ode about *An Aging Pilot; Willie Wilbanks*—a Medal of Honor recipient who foiled an ambush on ARVN troops by firing his M16 out the window of his O-1; *Bird Dog' Pilots' Heaven*; and *There are no REMF's in Vietnam*. Jonathan was joined by fellow FAC, Dave Mackay (Covey 636). Jonathan and Dave surprised us with *Nature's Cathedral*—a tribute to "Raccoon," a talented homeless singer/songwriter who spent the day with us last year. You can see Raccoon playing and dancing in the parking lot of a Grateful Dead concert at www.raccoon.com. Jonathan and Dave sang another catchy tune that still sticks in my head—*Dear Ma'am, Your Son is Dead*. A complete annotated listing of songs sung by Jonathan and Dave are provided at the end of this report (as well as how to obtain copies of their CD's).

Jonathan flew the O-1E "Bird Dog" from April '66 through February '67 as an in-country FAC in II Corps' Kontum Province and spent some time flying over the DMZ north of I Corps. Dave flew the O-2A (from Pleiku in II Corps in '69) on out-of-country missions over Laos.

Bob Berwin, 3rd Mar Div, was an RTO (Radio/Telephone Operator). Bob says that's a synonym for "Target." This was Bob's first attempt at poetry and reading with the MDWP. Bob read *Navy Pier, San Diego*—a flash back to the sights and sounds of a troop ship leaving the Navy Pier at Dan Diego; *Mail Call* (written Veterans Day morning) —about receiving mail addressed to "Any Marine" scented with Cool-Aid, Channel #5 and Woolworth #2; and *Illuminate*—a humorous, true story about being assigned a 1-million candle-light searchlight while on guard duty.



I was pleased to see Gary Lillie once again in our audience. Gary is one of the forces behind veteran's radio.net. Their theme: "Ordinary people doing extraordinary things." Tune it in next Saturday morning at <http://www.veteransradio.net>. I just happened to have a copy of Gary's *It Don't Mean Nothin*, which Gary asked me to read. Later in the day, Gary read (from memory) a poem about a visit to the Vietnam Art Museum with a young student he befriended.



Between readers, Dick Epstein read a poem sent by Barb Whitmarsh—*To My Vet*. Barb and her husband have published the poetry of many veterans throughout the years in their annual journal—*DEROS*. Barb and her husband hail from MO.



Larry and Susan Wiseman participated in the week-long tribute to veterans activities on the Mall. Larry played trumpet for twenty years and Susan is a spiritual singer/songwriter. You can hear their award winning CD: *The Soldier* at <http://www.susandwiseman.com>. Susan sang 6 *West-Line 5 (Go There for Me)*—a touching tribute to her cousin, SP4 Guy Lamar Mears Jr., (Medivac Crew Chief KIA 1970). Susan also told us about her son, David, who recently returned from Iraq

and is recovering in a Texas hospital from head wounds. Larry played *Taps* (at our tent and at the Wall) and a medley of familiar melodies. Bill MacDonald, President of the Military Writers Society of America, awarded their CD the “MWSA 2005 - Music CD of the Year.” Susan has seventy-five of her own songs for free download at www.tributelady.com



Mary Garvey was a surprise find. Tom McLean told me she sang with the MDWP in 1993. Mary captures your attention with her clear, quiet Irish voice. But there is a distinct conflict with the sweetness of her voice and the stark picture she paints with her words. I hope to contact Mary and get the titles of the songs she sang and maybe get some of her material on the MDWP Web site. Mary sang *In the Valley of the Shadow of Death* and *It's Never Enough*—dedicated to the 101st.



Mike McDonnell (co-founder of the MDWP) read the first poem he wrote about Vietnam: *Magilla*—a poem about James McGill, listed on Panel 20E, Line 105; *From the Wall*—a poem incorporating hypothetical conversations among the spirits in the Wall; one of Mike's favorite Vince Kasper poems: *Bill's Candle*—a poem in which husband and wife on different continents share a moment together with the aid of a candle and interference by Mike; and *Lock & Load*—a recent Clyde Wray poem about President Bush's misplaced trust in supposed political allies.



Emily Strange served as a Donut Dolly based at Dong Tam with the 9th Infantry Division of Mobile Riverine Force. I recommend that you visit Emily's Web site at <http://www.emilydd.com>. It's filled with poems, photos and love. Emily told us of several humorous (and not so humorous) incidents that happen to female Red Cross workers during their visits aboard ship and at isolated firebases throughout Vietnam.

Sharon Saint Clair stopped by and read an emotion-filled poem written to a friend who recently passed away. Sharon's poem is entitled *Don't Tell*.



You couldn't help hear singer/songwriter Alexandra Lajoux harmonized with Lou Barnett as he played his guitar and sang. Alexandra sang *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 money she receives for packages she sends to our troops in Iraq.

Songs sung by Jonathan Myer and Dave MacKay:

-- *The Aging Pilot*, wherein nostalgia for his youthful "glory days" flying supersonic interceptors yields to the recognition that, with the onset of his second childhood, he must rely on TLC, meds and nostrums to sustain the simplest of life's functions;

-- *Bird Dog' Pilots' Heaven*, like "The Big Rock Candy Mountain" an ideal place where perfect conditions allow impossible achievements for the "low 'n' slow" O-1 "Bird Dog" that so many FACs and others flew throughout the Southeast Asia (SEA) War; and

-- *Willie' Wilbanks' One-Man War*, a ballad about the O-1 FAC School classmate who gave his life to save about a hundred ARVN Rangers and their U.S. Army advisors from a deadly NVA/VC ambush on February 24, 1967. A year later, "Willie" was awarded the U.S. Air Force's second Medal of Honor (and the first posthumously) of the SEA War.

-- *Nature's Cathedrals*, one of the late Raccoon's songs, sung in his memory and vision of man's search for peace and heart's ease amid the wonderments of Nature;

-- *Coyote Four-One*, Jonathan's ballad about an F-4 that crashed while under his control during an air strike in the DMZ the night of October 13, 1966, and how he learned the identities of its crew 30+ years later, from the Wall, itself;

-- *Dear Ma'am, Your Son Is Dead*, Dave's darkly satirical "letter" to inform a mother that her FAC son had been killed in his O-2 while putting in an air strike on Highway 96 (this song had also been adopted by the "Nail" FACs in Thailand, who had substituted a different -- and defiantly obscene -- ending, featuring their OV-10);

-- *Draft Dodger Rag*, of Korean War vintage and sung for Jim Roper (our "third FACero" who'd taught it to us, and is now in Colorado), to show how dodgers will always have a million excuses while encouraging others to do the nation's dangerous work;

-- *FAC and the Green Beret*, Jonathan's January 1967 spoof about a mission where everything that can go wrong does: a Special Forces patrol is ambushed, the snarky FAC comes to its aid, confusion ensues, and the "winners" make it home;

-- *Frankie and Johnny (Air Force Style)*, Jonathan's update of the old classic to tell how Officers' Club hostess Frankie revenges herself against philandering fighter pilot Johnnie, and how things went at his ensuing military funeral;

-- *Ho Chi Minh Trail*, F-4 pilot Toby Hughes's chilling description of the many years of interdiction missions flown against "the Trail" under routinely hazardous conditions;

-- *160 VC in the Open*, Toby's flamboyantly callous reaction at finding a "lucrative target" shows how the "ideal" air-to-ground war should go (not for the "PC" at heart!);

-- *I Fly the Line*, Dave's proprietary approach to "his" area of responsibility as a FAC, from routine surveillance to the control of air strikes, all in an ancient airplane against the wily foe known collectively as "Charlie";

-- *Jolly Green*, a paeon to the USAF's large rescue helicopter, the HH-3, which rescued many a downed aircrew in hostile territory, and was known theater-wide as the "Jolly Green Giant" in light of its size and camouflage color scheme;

-- *My Peace Song*, Jonathan's sardonic approach to making peace with his VC and NVA enemies of the SEA War, but (like St. Augustine's classic plea for continence and chastity) . . . "not yet . . .";

-- *New Guinea Strafers*, an irreverent song from WW-II about attack pilots in the Pacific Theater who were enjoined by their unsympathetic commander to fly ever lower on their strafing passes -- and what they did about it; and finally --

-- *Reunion*, Toby Hughes's great song of sadness and memory for those lost in SEA War combat, and how "We'll all meet at that final Great Reunion / And we'll fly with angels, out beyond the stars."

If you would like to obtain a CD of Jonathan's and others' songs of the Southeast Asia War, contact him at www.j-bmyer-alexva@erols.com.

Thanks to all of you who participated and to those who help sponsor MDWP activities on the Mall. Thanks to Cathy Solomonson for manning the camera and her husband Darrell for all of his great photos. 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 (I'll have many new photos): www.Memorialdaywritersproject.com.

Request 1: If anyone has any suggestions on how to reach to today's veterans, let's hear it.

Request 2: If you have any suggestions for improving the MDWP venue on the Mall, or are interested in being a sponsor to help defray the rental cost of the tent, let's hear from you. Send your comments to: eppy1111@aol.com



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