
Action Report: Memorial Day Writers' Project (MDWP)

Activity: A Tribute to Veterans

Date: Nov 11, 2008

Location: Washington, DC

(Constitution Ave., Area 5, behind the sidewalk facing the duck pond)

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



Heading for Ca Mau and Canto



Saigon at night

On Veterans Day 2007, we had eighteen participants who read, played and sang of sons and lost friends, of air strikes and firefights. On Veterans Day 2008, we had thirteen participants: 8 old timers and 5 new comers. I placed a substantial number of MDWP Action Reports from last Memorial Day and Veterans Day on our display table in front of the MDWP tent, as well as copies of *Hugs* (poems written by Vince Kaspar), a personal unpublished report written by Page Communication Engineer (equipment photographer) Mid Hunt, telling of his experience while trapped in Hue during Tet '68, a photo journal from Lt. Tom Brinston of his trip back to Qui Nhon and my notebook of Vietnam era photos. To this, we added copies of *Lord, I'm Dancing As Fast As I Can*, by Joy Matthews Alfred (known locally as poet Sistah Joy), *Your Hero And Mine, Scott*, a collection of letters written by Scott Christofferson before he was KIA at age 19, *Cologne Number 10 for Men*, written by Dick Morris, his newly released CD *Skytroopers*, and *A Taste of War*, written and donated by Lt. William Powell of Arkansas. Boy, do I have some reading to do.

Tom McLean got us warmed up with THREE NEW SONGS written just last month. With Tom's permission, I hope to have sound bites from some of his new work available on the MDWP Web site. Tom sang *Conversation with Grandfather* (a poem to update his Civil War Veteran Grandfather about the current state of affairs); *Mission of a Different Kind* (about two Vietnam veterans, who were victims of the same booby trap, each thinking that they were the sole survivor, after many years crossed paths and now undertake a new mission to help their fellow neighbors); *Aging Veteran* (a song that reminisces about where we've been and where we're going); *Steve Ashcroft*, a song about a country boy who wanted to answer his county's call but was turned down for medical reasons—the Army changed his life anyway; Tom's signature songs, *Spirits of the Wall*, and *We Were There*. Like Bob Dylan, Arlo Guthrie or Willie Nelson, Tom has something to say and he has a knack for saying what's tucked away in all of us. In his 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) and first played with the MDWP in 1993. It is always good to see and hear Tom McLean. I wonder if Nancy Mowry (from our northern border) had Tom in mind when she wrote her poem: *I Wasn't There*?

Clyde Christofferson read excerpts from a recently published collection of letters sent home by his 19-year old brother, Scott Christofferson, who was ambushed near Chu Lai as part of Operation Wheeler, while serving with the 101st as combat reporter. Scott routinely participated in operations, and his loss typifies the randomness of death that was always with us. Scott, and the 2nd platoon, was ambushed by two well armed North Vietnamese Companies—approximately 200 enemy soldiers. The enemy was driven off, leaving 60 North Vietnamese dead at the cost of 17

members of the 101st. Scott refused to leave his position as he provided defensive cover fire enabling other members of his platoon to withdraw.

Tom McLean and the FACeros (Jonathan Myer and Dave MacKay) had a little competition today from **Richard**



Morris. Richard Morris was a rifle platoon leader with A Co. 2nd Bn 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division in '67. He wrote quite a few songs while he was in Vietnam and recently recorded nineteen of them with musician and record producer Franklin Taggart from Silver Spring, MD. The result is "Skytroopers—songs of war, peace and love from Vietnam" (lyrics can be seen at www.vietwarsongs.com). Richard's CD can be obtained at <http://cdbaby.com/cd/richardmorris>). One of his songs, "Diggin' a Hole," was a Finalist in the Vocal Jazz & Blues category of the 23rd Annual Mid-Atlantic Song Contest in Vienna, Virginia (www.saw.org/masc.asp). The song is about the foxholes and sleeping holes dug everywhere we went in Vietnam—to stay alive. Richard also wrote a novel *Cologne No. 10 for Men*, fiction that grew out of his songs and experiences in Vietnam. Here are just a few titles Richard sang

throughout the day. All done in baritone voice to show tune music deserving of a Clyde Wray play:

1. *Charlie*, an alluring song about Richard's elusive new friend, Charlie.
2. *John Wesley*, a song about 1st Cavalry Division point man who volunteered for point for an entire year, killed a dozen VC.
3. *The Bong Song Bridge*, a catchy tune about the easy time spent guarding the Bong Song Bridge.
4. *Digging a Hole*, about fox holes and sleeping holes dug to protect all grunts.
5. *When's The Sun Gonna Shine On Camp Evans?* monsoon season at the northern HQ of the 1st Cav.
6. *Lonesome for You*, a love song from Richard to his wife, Barbara.
7. *Chanh Giao Cave*, a song about the Rockpile Operation of A Co. 2/5, a 13-day siege.
8. *Charlie's Gone from Khe Sahn*, a slow wistful tune. With 1,000 dead, 19,000 called it quits and fled (Operation Pegasus, 31 March 68).
9. *It's a Long Row to Hoe*, a marching song with the sound of boots for determination and voices disappointment at the lack of support from folks back home.
10. *Smoking Hamlet*, an eerie Door's-like song about the Charlies' destruction of a Montagnard village in the Central Highlands.
11. *Go to Sleep*, a beautifully sung children's lullaby.

While at the mic, Richard mentioned that he didn't really know if the incident captured in his song about John Wesley was fabricated. Someone in the audience said he knew John Wesley and that he knew the story to be true.

Our **Two FACeros** (em-*phah*-sis on 2nd syl-*lah*-ble), Air Force Forward Air Controllers (FACs) **Jonathan Myer** and



Dave MacKay, sang 19 songs. As first arrival, Jonathan did four of his own, then Dave joined in and did the rest in two sets. 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 as well as South Vietnam and the DMZ. The FACeros' songs are

listed, with notes, at the end of our report.

Bob Berwin, 3rd Mar Div, was an RTO (Radio/Telephone Operator). Bob says that's a synonym for "Target." Bob read a haiku written by Abigail Friedman, *Mail Call* (about receiving mail addressed to "Any Marine" scented with Cool-Aid, Channel #5 and Woolworth #2) and *Trying to Get away From My My One Bad Vietnam Day*, a poem about AA meetings in the Pentagon basement where six out of 20,000 personnel met to discuss their emotional problems. Bob stated that these meetings and the lessons learned now take place at Walter Reed. Bob was working on a photo journal and he made an effort to ask MDWP presenters to spell their names. When ever I could, I told the other presenters that Bob was with the FBI and not to provide their correct names.



Full-time poet, **Sistah Joy**, was with us this Veterans Day. Sistah Joy read: *I Proudly Wave the Flag* and *Freedom's Echo*, which she wrote after being ask to review visual arts of newly arrived immigrants; *I Stand Tall*, a poem about the past five years of a young man's life, who despite great tragedy, stood tall through it all; *The Sparrow*; a poem about a young person, who despite hardships and clipped wings, had to fly and finally soar; and *Grand Mama's Good Life*, in the voice of the Islands. 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 "Verse, Vibes, & Bites" a monthly poetry series that includes featured poets, music and open mic at an area Barnes & Noble bookstore. I can proudly state that I once read with Sistah Joy at the Takoma Park Library. As you can imagine Sistah Joy is inspirational and highly spirited. She fits right in.



Maritza Rivera Cohen, founder of the Mariposa Poetry Salon of College Park, MD was also with us to celebrate her son's recent return from Iraq. I have to admit, Maritza was my mentor. Everything I know, as host of the MDWP, I learned from her. Maritza read *Semper Fi*, a poem about giving the life of one's son to the Marine Corps; *A Dirty Word Called Deployment*, which captures the sights and sounds of the staging area until silence sets in; and *Encounter*, a five-part poem that takes the listener through several real-life situations, each leading to danger and potential destruction. I remember the last line as a terrorist with hidden explosives walked toward a check point where the U.S. soldier is raising his weapon to a local who is ignoring his warning to halt: "What ever happens next...matters."



Emily Strange came with her own, rather large, personal bodyguard (as she always does). Emily served as a Donut Dolly based at Dong Tam with the 9th Infantry Division Mobile Riverine Force. I recommend that you visit Emily's Web site at <http://www.emilydd.com>. It's filled with poems, photos and lots of love. Emily shared *Stacy, He was a Friend of Mine*, a poem about a chopper pilot, who didn't come back, and an essay that told of the lasting friendships we made and the compassion we gain as we get older.

Although **Alexandra Lajoux** came only to listen, we got her to sing her beautiful and heartfelt trademark song that came to her while she slept: *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 funds she receives for packages she sends to our troops in Iraq. Next time she comes, I'm going to give her a job as camera operator.



Gerald Ney arrived from the City of Brotherly Love at 1600 hrs with his son. Geri told us of his first photo recon mission, life at LZ English and LZ Ollie, a USO show, where George Jessel (now there's a name from the past) put on a grand show in World War I uniform. He also related a story as Perimeter Duty Officer when troops guarding the wire let loose on the local village just outside the camp boundary. Gerry got Jonathan Myer to provide some western "noodeling" for background as he read a poem *Victor Charles*, cowboy style (Yep Ahuh) *An Irish Mench*, a tribute to Gerry's friend who recently passed away from Agent Orange; a tribute to his mother, *An Ode to An Honest Man*, and *Brothers and Sisters of the Heart: To My Fellow Vets*. Somehow I didn't get a photo of Gerry and his son, Steve. They also brought an ample supply of brownies, cookies and beverages. The tent teardown crew enjoyed it all.

Our host, **Dick Epstein**, who served with the 1st Signal Brigade at Phu Mu, Thailand and later as a civilian with Page Communications Engineers throughout Vietnam squeezed in three poems: one for Clyde Wray, *I Want to Write!*, one for Rod "Doc" Kane, *It's My Job*, and one of his own, *Letting Go*. Phu Mu, by the way, was a radio relay site (troposcatter) for all voice and tty traffic going to the NKP Airbase. So, Dick provided communication support between Vietnam and the Air Force 'Fast Movers' and FACs based out of NKP and Laos.

A veteran identified only as a Tanker, who hitch hiked from OK to pay his respects at the Wall on Veterans Day, closed us out (in the dark) with *God Bless America*. I asked him if he was ready to play on a moment's notice. He said "I'm a Tanker." He couldn't



sing and he couldn't play, but he was ready in a moment's notice. We applauded him, I gave him a hug, and told him what a good job he did as he started his trip back to OK.

We ended the day with a truly great meal at *Nam Viet*, a local restaurant in Arlington, VA. My wife Noy and her nephew, Dare, Dick Morris and his wife Barbara, and our host Jonathan Myer, his wife Brenda and their son made for good company and good conversation.

Songs sung by the Two FACeros, **Jonathan Myer** and **Dave MacKay** (authors listed, where known):

1. *The Aging Pilot*, where Jonathan contrasted his early years flying jet fighter-interceptors with his increasingly decrepit "senior years." (This was written well before his May heart operation — to correct a late-discovered birth defect: a hole between his upper heart chambers — which has made him a new man . . . so to speak.)
2. *The Dumbest Thing* ("a flyer can do . . . is run his engine until it quits") — which Jonathan managed to do twice during his Vietnam tour . . . something not recommended at any time, and certainly not in the middle of an airstrike or over rough terrain a long way from base. . . .
3. *Coyote Four-One* recounted the loss of an F-4 one night (13 October 1966) over the DMZ. The pilot simply misjudged his altitude during a weapons pass and literally plowed a furrow in the ground, "Oh, shit!" being his final words. More than 30 years later, Jonathan located the crew's names on Our Wall.
4. *A Death in the Dak Na Valley* 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, and the song integrates the accounts of FAC DeVere 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 was rescued with severe injuries.
5. *Ballad of the Green Berets* was U.S. Special Forces SSgt Barry Sadler's great hit of 1965, when the war was "young," the country supportive — and we were soon to take our own turns in the Southeast Asia War! (Sung by Dave.)
4. *Hello, Ashau Tower* (by Capt. Richard Robbins) describes the heroic action of A-1E "Skyraider" pilot Bernie Fisher (callsign "Hobo 51") as he landed in the Ashau Valley despite enemy fire to rescue downed A-1 pilot Wayne "Jump" Myers. For that deed he was awarded the Air Force's first Medal of Honor of the SEA War. (As originally performed by Capt. Robbins, the song "was not fit for family listening"; this version, a duet led by Dave, is . . . pretty much.)
5. *BUFF* (by Dick Jonas; sung as a duet) gives a 50+ -year history of the B-52 (aka Big Ugly Fat Fu- *Feller*), from premier nuclear weapon carrier during the Cold War through conventional bomb drops all over Southeast Asia, Iraq (both campaigns), and Afghanistan.
6. *Different Missions* (by Bill Rothas) narrated his role in the EB-66 (used as a standoff jamming platform) while his Aviation Cadets classmate, Dick Allee, was shot down in an F-105 fighter on a strike mission.
7. *Give Me Operations (FACero Style)* (by Jonathan) updates the original version (in which a succession of aircraft were lampooned), to address the shortcomings of those used for FAC operations in SEA, specifically the O-1, O-2, OV-10, and Fast-FAC jets; only the later A-10 (now in an OA-10 version for FACing) passes muster.
8. *Glory Flying Regulations (SEA to GWOT)*, originally a post-WW-II satire in which mighty deeds in combat yield to surreal post-war conditions, is updated (by Jonathan) for analogous situations that prevailed during and after "Veetnom" and now during global-war-on-terror operations.
9. *Raven FACero*, which became the signature song of Raven Jim Roper, Dave MacKay and Jonathan Myer as (originally) the "Three FACeros," describes the unfortunate results of a Raven FAC's R&R (rest and recuperation trip), when he had "loved not wisely but too well." (. . . A warning for all warriors, no doubt.) Dave led the duet.
10. *Raven FAC Battle Hymn* (based on Dick Jonas's "Battle Hymn of the Red River Rats"): Led by Dave, this stirring song pays tribute to the deeds, courage and sacrifices of the Raven FACs — volunteers (never more than 22 at a time), who flew a then-secret war over Laos and suffered the highest loss rate of any FAC unit in the SEA War.
11. *Nail 57* (by Irv LeVine; sung *con brio* by Dave) recounts in humorous-but-hairy detail how Nail 57 (FAC Jerry Stephan, flying an O-2A on a night mission over the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos) found himself in an aerial duel with a Russian AN-2 (code-named "Colt," but referred to in SEA as "Annie") — from which he escaped only by the skin of his teeth.
12. *One-Level Gunner* (by Toby Hughes) describes fictional thoughts of an F-4 pilot (sung by Dave) and the Vietnamese gunner (sung by Jonathan) who shoots at him: If the F-4s kill the gunner, his replacement

might shoot straighter — while the gunner deliberately misses the Phantoms so he can sit out the war in relative safety. (It's funnier when sung.)

13. *Pink Elephant Polka* (by Jonathan) describes a mission where he observed two pink elephants, fired at them, missed, felt his O-1E bounce, saw nothing below, but returned to base (RTB'ed) forthwith. Although MAC-V Intel scoffed at his report, an Army passenger confirmed the color on a second flight a few days later.
14. *Sher-Babes* (by Toby Hughes; duet led by Dave) describes a mission during the siege of Khe Sanh, wherein Toby's F-4 (named after his wife, Sherry) took serious hits while attacking an enemy truck park and he barely managed to recover . . . at Danang, where "She 'dies' as her wheels touch the ground."
15. *Warrior Bards* (by Irv LeVine) pays tribute to several fellow-balladeers of the SEA War, who keep our generation's combat memories alive. A couple more verses (by Jonathan) add FAC singers (who emerged after Irv had written his song, focused on the Johnson-McNamara years), and summarize the war's ignoble end.
16. *Your "Flying Special"* (by Jonathan; duet led by Dave) offers tributes, as well as warnings, to the various aircrews, aircraft and missions that took us all "into harm's way" and beyond, during our theater-wide air operations.
17. *58,000 Names Carved in a Wall* (by Jamie O'Hara) is the most fitting memorial to our losses in SEA, killed both in action and from other causes, that one can offer on Veterans' or any other day spent in the vicinity of our Wall. As sung by Dave, it incorporated Irv LeVine's progressive numbers as names were added, culminating in the **58,260** names etched thereon as of Memorial Day, 2008.

New Books and CD's by MDWP Presenters

Scott A. Christofferson, *Your Hero and Mine. Scott*, a collection of insightful and penetrating letters written by a 19-year old Information Officer attached to the 101st Screaming Eagles.

William Powell, *A Taste of War*, an Infantry Platoon Leader's recollections of service at Tay Ninh and Fire Base Hunter with the 25 Infantry Division.

Richard Morris, *Cologne No. 10 for Men*, a catch 22 look at life with the 1st Cav. Order from Amazon.com and other online booksellers.

Richard Morris, *Skytroopers*, original songs written in Vietnam. Order from www.cdbaby.com/cd/richardmorris.

Joy Matthews Alford, *Lord, I'm Dancing As Fast As I Can*, Sistah Joy's first book of poetry.

Alexandra Lajoux, *My Country is Your Country*, a blend of country, folk, gospel and bluegrass. The album's title song, "We Thank You," was sung by Alexandra at the MDWP Tent on the Mall. Available at <http://www.alexismusicstudio.com>

Jonathan Myer, *Songs of the O-1E Bid Dog* and CD's from the *Society of Old Bold Aviators*. Order from: www.j-bmyer-alexva@erols.com.

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. Our best wishes to our brothers Briaah "Gunny" Conner and Marine Roy Correnti. 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.eppy1111@aol.com.
God Bless.

In the words of co-founder and poet Clyde Wray: "In the beginning there was sadness, anger and a thought. The thought needed other souls, minds, and bodies to grow. And they came. And now they still come, a little less wounded, grayer and more portly. The years have flown by and still they come to the Wall! They come to remember and we the artist of every persuasion still come to the MDWP Tent and the Wall to remember in our unique ways; but remember we do."