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Action Report: Memorial Day Writers' Project (MDWP)

Activity: A Tribute to all Veterans

Date: November 11, 2011

Location: Washington, DC

(Constitution Ave., and 21 St.) behind the sidewalk facing Constitution Ave.

Weather: Mid 70s (degrees), cloudless blue sky.

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This past Veterans Day 2012, we had smaller number of participants and that made the day even more of a family event. Several people missed our day on the National Mall because they were convinced by local media that Monday was celebrated as Veterans Day. We hold true to the 11<sup>th</sup> month, the 11<sup>th</sup> day and the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. Dick Morris strained his back and wasn't able to be with us. Tom Mclean couldn't be with us and Jim Stewart sent his apologies from OK. Jim was in the final stages of adopting two young boys and couldn't make the trip this season.

We got to hear more songs and more poetry from all of our participants with a little more time at the mic. I'm pleased to announce that we also had a new sound system that worked out just great and a new supplier for our tent. Because the weather was warm and there was no threat of rain, I didn't order tent walls and floor, as I usually do, and that reduced our rental cost. A summary of the day's activities are provided below.

**Doug Bergman** was early on scene and stopped everyone who walked by with an offering of free signed copies of his book [Names I Can't Remember](#). It was good to have Doug with us again. When Doug took to the mic, he told us of his past trip to Vietnam, personal memories of a young street vender, and his involvement in improving a local school by building a bathroom and a new roof. Doug read from several sections from his book and gave an entertaining talk.



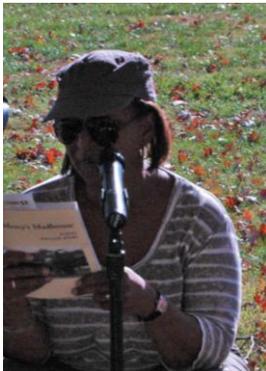
**Jonathan Myer.** Jonathan flew the O-1E Bird Dog (aka L-19), as an in-country Province FAC, and spent a few weeks flying over the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separated North from South Vietnam. As a Kontum Province FAC in II Corps' Central Highlands, he regularly flew visual reconnaissance (VR), air strike control and liaison missions to provide intelligence to MAC-V, and tactical air (tacair) support for U.S. Special Forces (Green Berets) and Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) units' ground operations (1966 - 67). His around-the-clock DMZ missions involved looking for trucks and any other signs of North Vietnamese Army



(NVA) infiltration of troops and supplies into the South, to be followed by air strikes when found. A listing of the ballads Jonathan sang throughout the day is provided at the end of this report.

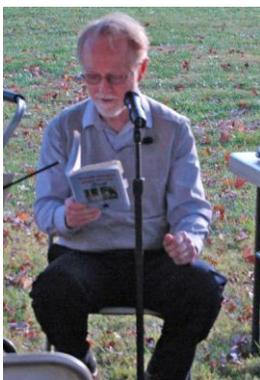
**Richard (Dick) Epstein**, our host, read several poems throughout as readers readied themselves to read as well as from his turn at the mic. Dick read *"Thank God I'm Not a Grunt"* in tribute to Gary Lille; *"A Sense of Honor,"* a poem which touches on the impact of the Wall on an anonymous veteran; "Bang! Bang!" (a remembrance of playing cowboys and Indians as a young boy and the events of Viet Nam); "Strange Sounding Words," (a poem about the all too familiar names of towns and villages throughout Viet Nam and the memories that rise); "At The Writers' Tent," (a poem about the ceremonies at the Wall and at the MDWP tent); "Untangle Those Things," (a poem about the letting go of thoughts and emotions); and "Get Over It!" (advice from Ed Henry and Richard's response). Dick reports that he also was asked to read at the US Navy Memorial and Museum with members of the Veterans Writing Project sponsored by Ron Capps.

**Maritza Rivera**, veteran and a mother of two veterans, read several poems from her recent chapbook: *"A Mother's War"*. Her selections included "Camouflage", (about deployment); "Encounter", (a poem



written in two voices, read by Maritza and Richard Epstein) is a five-part poem that takes the listener through several real-life war time situations. Toward the end of "Encounter", a terrorist with hidden explosives walks toward a checkpoint where a U.S. soldier is raising his weapon as he is trained. The last line reads: "What ever happens next...matters; "Semper Fi", (about a last letter) and "Witness", (about casualties of war). She also read poem by author William Byers: "Tail Gunner" and others. Maritza, a local poet, hosts the three-day Mariposa Poetry Retreat at the Capital Retreat Center in the Catocin Mountains and plans to conduct another one next fall. Maritza and I have also been collaborating with Dr. Fred Foote in the Warrior Poetry Project at the Walter Reed Military Medical Center in Bethesda.

**Clyde Christofferson** read from his dog-eared copy of *Your Hero and Mine, Scott,* a collection of letters written by his brother Scott, before his death near Chu Lai on October 8, 1967. Scott was a combat reporter for the 101st Airborne Division, and the unit he was with on that day got ambushed. Here's a



little taste of Scott's writing about war: ... the staccato rattle of machine guns, the whump of grenades, the concussions of the artillery, the whoosh of rockets, the roar of helicopters, the acid odor of people's sweat, the nearness of death and mutilation ... the stickiness of mud clinging to your boots, the hard-to-get-used-to feeling of being constantly wet. The lurking monster of futility which occasionally clutches your throat. The strangling loneliness that chokes you when you aren't busy. This and much more is apparent and real when you are actually here. It ain't nice, but it [the experience] reaches into part of your skull handshakes into consciousness cells of awareness which can be awakened in no other manner. To me, life should be spent awakening all those nasty little cells ...

Clyde told three stories. The first was about letters Scott had written to a high school friend. The second was about a combat photographer who had been with him the last four days of his life, and after thirty years of looking had finally found one of Scott's sisters and emailed her a tribute to him, as Scott had been his mentor. The email told how they both had been working with Frank McGee and an NBC news crew, and were choppered to a nearby hot LZ to be with the line company there under the command of Capt. Lawton: four



days later the company lost twenty soldiers, including Scott, in an ambush by a large North Vietnamese force. The third story was about a phone call Clyde received, after an earlier MDWP meeting, from Capt. Lawton, who happened to live only a ten-minute drive away. (A small world, indeed!) Capt. Lawton had survived the ambush but had been badly wounded and spent the next two years recuperating at Walter Reed.



**Dattrinne Barker** has been sidelined for a while and we're glad she returned to participate with us. Dattrinne read a favorite of mine "Taps" and several other very musical poems about our veterans and war.

\*\*\*\*\*Songs sung by Jonathan Myer (JM) throughout the day are described below\*\*\*\*\*

1. "Warrior Bards" (by "Yodelin' Irv" LeVine; added verses by JM): This is their tribute to several of the military singer-songwriters who documented some of the Southeast Asia (SEA) War's triumphs, tragedies, pain, and sardonic humor: All across the country side, You'll hear them sing and play, Those warrior bards from long ago, It seems like yesterday. They'll sing you songs of fighting men On land and in the sky, Of how it felt to live back then And have their good friends die. Irv took the war up through LBJ and McNamara; Jonathan continued through Nixon, Kerry, Fonda, and how finally "Congress left the South [Vietnam] bereft By cutting off the funds." 2. "Answering the 9-11 Call" (by JM): Written within a month after that fatal date, this song expresses the USA's defiant response to al-Qaeda's attack. Its chorus, "Life and Liberty and Happiness / As Freedom marches on," reaffirms our national principles in the face of the extremist terrorism that changed our country's (and the world's) course at the beginning of our Third Millennium.
2. "Bird Dog Pilots' Heaven" (by JM) envisions impossibly powerful performance by that little aircraft, and the total mission success of which its Forward Air Controller pilots can experience only in their dreams: In "Bird Dog" pilots' heaven, . . . . . Your engine's double power, It only burns a pint of gas . . . . . For every flying hour. So you fly and fight and always win, . . . Climb straight up and loop and spin, And never, ever auger in — . . . . . In "Bird Dog" pilots' heaven.
3. "The Aging Pilot" (by JM) contrasts his early years flying jetfighter-interceptors "across the blue sky like a meteor's flash" with the inevitable changes that forty more years bring: ". . . I'm approaching my dotage, / My second childhood is well underway — " but just the same, everyday on the right side of the grass is a victory!
4. "Glory Flying Regulations (III)" (by JM) updates the Oscar Brand song that contrasted the thrills of WW-II combat flying with the boredom and restrictions of peacetime flying. Only now the contrast for each Service is post-Vietnam, and up to the advent of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and reduction of manned fighters. The final verse sums it up: Our mighty fighting aircraft unleashed death with every pass, Annihilating Charlie as he hid there in the grass, But now they're on display — with a pole stuck up their ass, — The force is shot to hell!
5. "58,000 Names Carved in a Wall" (poem by Johnnie Rainwater, tweaked by Irv LeVine): This song captures the immensely powerful effect Maya Lin's "Wall" has had on Vietnam veterans and bereaved families alike, as they find the names of dead comrades and loved ones inscribed thereon. Irv's version substituted a numbers progression, from 50,000 to 54,000 to 58,000 names as the SEA War went on, with a final spoken line: "And there's 58 thousand, 2 hundred and 67 names. . . on that Wall" (as of 2009).
6. "Teeny Weeny Bird Dog" (by JM), his first post-SEA War song (1997), was drawn from his experiences flying that low, slow airplane some 30 years earlier. With all its shortcomings of performance, equipment and vulnerability, it was flown in parts of Southeast Asia throughout the war. Moreover, one reason so few

O-1s are in museums is that, unlike its more advanced successors, most of the surviving birds are privately owned — and still flying!

7. “Ballad of the Black Beret” (by JM). While walking through the Post Exchange of “his Fort” (Ft. Myer), Jonathan saw the 10 May 2010 Army Times, whose huge headline read: “SOLDIERS SAY: ‘DUMP THE BERET.’” The inside article began: “10 years later, soldiers still loathe it and want it off their heads.” That was enough for Jonathan, who had followed the original brouhaha in which the Army’s Chief of Staff decided that the black beret — the U.S. Army’s elite Ranger headgear— should be extended to the rest of the Army, to symbolize “a strategically responsive force for the 21st century.” Rage, scorn and scandal ensued . . . and this song documents most of it.
8. “Different Missions” (poem by Bill Rothas). On a December 1968 evening, Bill met his Aviation Cadets classmate, Dick Allee, for drinks at their Thai base club. Next day, Bill, in his EB-66 standoff jammer aircraft, heard his “buddy, Dick’s” Mayday call as his F-105 “Thud” fighter-bomber was “going down.” His poem about his lost comrade was published in the Air Force Times. Jonathan borrowed an old tune decades later to turn it into a song.
9. “Frankie and Johnnie (Air Force Style)” (by JM). This update of the old “he done her wrong” song transforms the duo into a military club hostess whose “man” was an Air Force fighter pilot. The story unfolds as before and Frankie’s philandering fighter jockey met his fate,” Spoken by [her] old forty-four.” The finale has him buried in a formal military funeral, at the end of which: The squadron gave Frankie Johnnie’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 man — till he done her wrong!”
10. “Mission to Mang Buk” (by JM). Mang Buk was a Special Forces camp in the northeastern part of Kontum Province in the Central Highlands (II Corps). Its altitude was about 5,000 feet, approachable only over difficult and mountainous terrain and requiring relatively good weather. On this mission, Jonathan’s passenger was an Army Ranger Captain Phil Bosma — escorting “two machine gun barrels and three cases of ammo / And some mailbags beneath his feet” — all of which added significantly to the gross weight of his Bird Dog. Takeoff was interesting; landing (on wet pierced steel planking, or PSP) was even more so. The beers offered by “the A-team commander, buried in his poncho,” were very welcome indeed . . . and so were next ones “for the road.” — Just another day at the office? Well, yes — but you really had to have been there. . . .
11. “My Peace Song” (by JM). In his own words at the time: While cruising down I-95 ten years ago to attend fellow-FAC “Willie” Wilbanks’s inauguration into Georgia’s Aviation Hall of Fame, I heard Brownie McGhee’s butter-smooth guitar and Sonny Terry’s chugging harmonica as they sang “Down by the Riverside.” As the SEA War had been over for more than 25 years, I decided to write my own peace song and “study war no more” . . . AFTER I “lay down my Willie Pete” (marking rockets), “smoke grenade,” “nape and snake” (napalm and high-drag 500-lb bombs), “CBUs” (cluster bomb units), and “20 mike-mike” (20-millimeter machine-gun fire) — “Then I’ll study war no more!” Like Frank Warner’s “Old Rebel Soldier” — “I won’t be reconstructed, and I do not give a damn!” (Capt. Hilliard Almond Wilbanks, KIA 24 February 1967, was awarded the USAF’s second (and first posthumous) Medal of Honor of our Southeast Asia War.)
12. “Draft Dodger Rag (Updated)” (Originally “a satirical anti-war song by Phil Ochs, a U.S. protest singer from the 1960s known for being a harsh critic of the American military industrial complex” — Wikipedia.) Hey! We don’t need no steenking anti-war protesters to tell us what’s wrong with our wars! Those of us who’ve “been there, done that, and have the T-shirts”(etc.) can do it quite well by ourselves, thank-you-very-much! Just the same, JM’s update keeps the first verse and several other lines (which he incorporates in subsequent verses) to chronicle a whole new set of excuses as he grows older — from Ochs’s “18” to his own “48 and overweight,” “69 and I’d be lyin’,” and “73, I cannot pee, . . .” (Need he say more? Well, he did — especially now that he’s 74, and counting.)
13. “FAC and the Green Beret” (by JM). The song begins with Special Forces radio operator asking for air support from his somewhat snotty FAC in his “Lima One-Nine,” (for “L-19,” the traditional Army name for

the "Bird Dog"). They trade barbs in the conversation that follows, tracing how a situation can "turn to worms" as both come under fire. After further confusion between radio operator, FAC and his fighters, the song ends happily: "Your friendly FAC and fighters will always save the day, / Killing off the Charlies till the last Green Beret!" While the song is a spoof on the actual "blood brotherhood" that prevailed between Province FACs and the Green Beret A-teams they supported, some of its incidents actually happened during Jonathan's FAC missions in Kontum Province.

14. "How I Went IFR in Flying Buffalo Shit" (by JM). This song is based on Jonathan's 30 July 1966 landing at Dak Pek, the Special Forces' most challenging landing strip in Kontum Province. Landing "uphill" involved a tight turn inside the hills bordering the rock-covered dirt strip, while landing "downhill" required an early landing to avoid running into a hill now at the strip's far end. Other features included the A-Team's camp bunkers to the north, a Montagnard village to the south, and water buffalo . . . well, anywhere they wanted to be. And therein lies the tale — which conclusively showed that environmental hazards posed by "VC buffalo" could be more dangerous than ground fire!
15. "Hunting Trucks by Starlight" (by JM). O-1E FACs flew "Tally Ho" missions (over the DMZ) around the clock from July 1966 through May 1967, looking for signs of enemy activity. Jonathan flew with them from late-September through mid-October 1966: At night with two of us flying in the "Bird Dog," one used alight-enhancing Starlite scope to look for trucks heading south on open stretches of road, while the other flew the aircraft. When we found one, we'd ask "Hillsboro" (our C-130 airborne command post) for flare-birds ("Blind Bats") and fighters — to strike before the truck disappeared under jungle canopy. The odds were usually with the trucks, but not this time. This is the story of that mission, flown with "Salty" Harrison, in October of 1966.
16. "My Last Flight" (by JM). They say a pilot never forgets his first squadron. Jonathan's was the 13th Fighter Interceptor Squadron (FIS), where he flew first F-86L "Sabre jets" and then F-101B/F "Voodoos," both aircraft jet interceptors with the mission of homeland air defense. A pilot's "last flight" is when he "goes west"; i.e., he dies. In the mind's eye, he may relive the sheer joys of special missions and the memories of comrades lost over the years, whether in battle, from accidents, or due to old age. He seeks that "final Great Reunion," whether in heaven or (more likely) "the other way," where he can relive the "Flying and fellowship, missions and crew — / A thousand souvenirs for those who flew. . . .

" Anyone interested in learning more about combat flying missions during the Southeast Asia War and the songs that describe them, or where to find CDs or DVDs that document them — please contact Jonathan Myer at: <j-bmyer-alexva@erols.com> or <soba@erols.com> The first address is best for Jonathan's own two CDs (to date), plus info on other "Warrior Bards" performers' own CDs, while the second is best for songs and performers on the three CDs produced from three annual Flyers' Songfests sponsors by the Society of Old Bold Aviators (SOBA).

#### **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, *Sky troopers*, original songs written in Vietnam. Order from [www.cdbaby.com/cd/richardmorris](http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/richardmorris).
- Joy Matthews Alford, *Lord, I'm Dancing As Fast As I Can*, *Sistah Joy's first book of poetry*.
- Joy Matthews Alford, *From Pain To Empowerment*. • John Top Holland and Father Patrick Bascio, *Perfidy: The Govt. Cabal That Knowingly Abandoned Our POWs and Left Them to Die*. • Maritza Rivera Cohen, *A Mother's War*.
- Jonathan Myer, *Songs of the O-1E Bird Dog* and CD's from the Society of Old Bold Aviators. Order from: j-bmyer-alexva@erols.com.

- Nancy Lynch, Vietnam Mailbag : Voices From the War, 1968-1972, available at <http://www.vietnammailbag.com/>
- 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>

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 brothers Brian "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](http://www.memorialdaywritersproject.com) or contact me at [www.dick\\_epstein@hotmail.com](mailto:www.dick_epstein@hotmail.com). God Bless.

We, artists of every persuasion, come to the MDWP Tent and the Wall to remember in our unique way. Remember we do. The above is a fairly accurate picture of what went on at the MDWP tent on Veterans Day 2010. 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. God Bless. P.S. Your donation is most welcomed to help pay for the rental of our tent on the Mall and to keep the MDWP going. The address is: MDWP, Richard Epstein, 1024 Stirling Rd., Silver Spring, MD 20901.

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 Brian "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](http://www.memorialdaywritersproject.com) or contact me at [www.dick\\_epstein@hotmail.com](mailto:www.dick_epstein@hotmail.com). God Bless.

P.S. Your donation is most welcomed to help pay for the rental of our tent on the Mall and to keep the MDWP going. The address is: MDWP, Richard Epstein, 1024 Stirling Rd., Silver Spring, MD 20901.