

Action Report: Memorial Day Writers' Project
Activity: Veterans Day - A Tribute to our Veterans
Date: Nov 11, 2013
Location: The National Mall, Washington, DC
Weather: Clear Sky, 63 degrees



The weather was perfect for the MDWP twentieth bi-annual gathering on the National Mall. We had fifteen participants throughout the day and several who read with us for the first time. At the conclusion of the open mic event, Jonathan and Brenda Myer, Richard and Noy Epstein, and Clyde Christofferson ended the day with a great Vietnamese meal just over the bridge in Arlington, VA. A brief summary of each participant's time at the MDWP microphone is provided below. Special thanks to Barbara Morris, who took care of CD and book sales, served as information specialist and greeted everyone who stopped by to look at the photo album and materials on the display table at the front of the MDWP tent.

Jonathan Myer sang a dozen songs, accompanied by his 12-string guitar. Half were his own, the rest borrowed or adapted from other singers and sources. Jonathan claims he took part in two wars: the "hot" one in Southeast Asia (SEA), where he flew the O-1E "Bird Dog" as a Forward Air Controller, or FAC, mostly in II Corps' Kontum Province, plus 3-1/2 weeks in I ("Eye") Corps flying over the so-called Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) out of Dong Ha (Marine base) in Quang Tri Province; the other was the Cold War, during which he flew fighter-interceptors in the Air/Aerospace Defense Command: a year in the F-86L "Sabre" jet, and ten years (three tours) in the F-101B/F "Voodoo" — from 1958 through 1970, with his 1966-67 SEA tour in the middle. His songs are listed at the end of this report.



Richard Morris, a 1st Lieutenant rifle platoon leader with 2nd Bn, 5th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, 1967-68, sang songs from his Skytroopers CD (www.cdbaby.com/cd/richardmorris) which he wrote in Vietnam in 1967 and recorded in 2007: "Diggin' A Hole," "Bong Son Bridge," "Chanh Giao Cave," "The Chaplain," "When's the Sun Gonna Shine on Camp Evans?," "Charlie's Gone From Khe Sahn," "Smoking Hamlet," "Counting Bodies in the Nam," "Mirage," and "I Got a Lonesome Me." Richard also read from his award winning novel *Cologne No. 10 For Men*, a humorous satire about the war. Richard read from several sections of his book describing the requirement to count bodies after a successful ambush, NVA soldiers preparing to escape entrapment in a hillside rockpile, and a platoon sergeant who was shot by a sniper. Richard's web site is www.richardmorrisauthor.wordpress.com.



Richard Epstein, our host for the day was a microwave radio repairman with the 1st Signal Brigade at Phu Mu, Thailand and also worked as a civilian field engineer with Page Communications Engineers throughout II and III Corps, Viet Nam. Richard got us off to an early start to satisfy two demanding members of the 1st Signal Brigade who wanted to hear him read. Richard started us off with two poems written by MDWP co-founder Clyde Wray: "*For Those Who Were Scared Shitless...*" and "*Of Common Ground.*" Richard also read some newer poems he recently wrote as part of the Walter Reed Warrior Poets Project: "*The Coconut Tree Monk*," (about a monk who lived in a coconut tree and claimed he had a solution that would stop the war); "*A Boy Named Thu*," (about a houseboy who needed a quick place to hide from the police); a poem in two parts "*Walk Tight/Hang Loose*" read with veteran Maritza Rivera Cohen and "*Get Over It*" (a conversation about war with co-founder Ed Henry).





Tom Lacombe, a draftee who served as a rifleman with the Fourth Infantry Division, read from his book *"Light Ruck, Vietnam 1969"*, a 2005 Virginia Festival of the Book Selection. His book tells us of a day when young men were willing to give up their lives to take a hill. One of the young men was Ziggy, an old-timer who had befriended Tom, an FNG, a few days before. Tom helps load Sigmond Sikorski on a medevac, knowing Ziggy will be O.K. A short time later word comes that the boy had died.

Maritza Rivera, US Army Tactical Intelligence Officer 1974 - 1978 read *"Final Draft,"* dedicated to the 22 veterans a day who take their own lives. She also read *"Witness,"* a poem about wounded soldiers, medics and casualties of war, and two other poems: *"Newtown's Law"* and *"Semper Fi,"* a last letter poem. Maritza leads a poetry workshop each year just across the MD border in PA.

Sistah Joy, a poet, author and local community activist read three original poems. Her first poem,



"I Remember" pays tribute to a recently deceased family member who served in Vietnam. She also shared *"Remembrances"* a tribute poem that honors veterans of all wars who gave their lives so that future generations might have an opportunity for a better life. Her final poem, *"Love Remains,"* is a poem of love and acknowledgement honoring all who gave the ultimate sacrifice. Each of the poems carries thematic messages of love, compassion and spirituality.

Norah A. Burns came to the 2013 Veteran's Day MDWP reading on the Mall with her husband, Daniel Burns, in honor of her Father, Grandfather's, Uncles and Cousins who have served in the military. Her father, Donald Taylor, served in Vietnam from 1969 to 1971 in DaNang, with the 37th Signal Battalion and in the Ashau Valley with the 101st Airborne. She read some previously presented poems including, *"I Remember You"*, *"Conflict"* and *"In The Land Of The Living"* which are in honor of her father, *"Time In Service"*, in honor of her cousin Jaworski Doucette who served several tours in Ramadi, Iraq and Afghanistan, and the newly penned *"My Legacy"* in honor of her Grandfather, Roy Jack, Great-Grandfather's, Uncles and Cousins who have served in wars past, in service present and the families that love them dearly, especially their children.

Brad White, a first timer with the MDWP and former Signals Intelligence Analyst with the Air Force. Brad read four of his poems: *"With Two Hands," "The Darkness We Share," "For You"* and *"The Guerrilla Stare."* Each of Brad's poems addressed thoughts about war, life in the military and the views of both military and non-military personnel. Brad and our host, Richard Epstein, participated in a five day workshop for veteran writers at George Washington University, Washington, DC. The workshop was free to veterans and was sponsored by Ron Capps, GW and the Veterans Writing Project.



Holley Watts, a '66-'67 Vietnam Red Cross Donut Dolly, read *47W*, a poem about her helping a guy find his buddy on The Wall on Memorial Day 2005. She also read about flying down the coast (from DaNang to Chu Lai) and the humorous response from the guys in the airfield tower on hearing the rare voice of an AMERICAN WOMAN, let alone one requesting landing instructions...with a country draw!! Remembering Bunny Olson was a humorous poem about a memorable Aussie named "Bunny" and the memorable toy koala he gave her before he left country. She closed with a poem about the frustration of trying to locate the guys you know you lost when all you had was their nicknames. The 34 names used in the poem were real, and still the question remains; *Where Can I Find Them On The Wall?*



Tom Glenn, Tom Glenn was in Saigon as an intelligence operative when the North Vietnamese attacked the city in 1975. Tom told us of his experience and how he tried to evacuate the 43 men who worked for him and their families.



George Patrick, another first timer with the MDWP, played background on his guitar for several of our poets and played several of his original songs with the sound of soulful blues.

Andre Taylor was first brought to us via Sistah Joy several years ago. Andre told us about his service in the U.S. Navy and read some of his spoken word poetry.



Gerald Ney, an aerial surveillance officer as OIC (Officer in Charge) of the Imagery



Interpretation Section of the 172nd MI Detachment, 173rd Airborne Brigade read several poems. Two were from a July 2013 Veterans Poetry Workshop and were in reaction to two other vets' poems also read. Hugh Martin's "Firework Elegy" on a PTSD response to 4th of July fireworks inspired "Home but Not Home" and W D Ehrhart's "Souvenirs" led me to write "Buyer, Supplier, not Taker". Also read "In Memory of Skip" about a Ft Benning classmate killed in Vietnam, "Gone With the Grin" written after the suicide of a vet co-worker, W D Ehrhart's "Farmer Nguyen" about a Vietnamese civilian caught between both sides, "The Way Forward" and "The Lost to Be Found", the last two dealing with the idea of the wounded healer.

Thank you to all who participated in the Memorial Day Writers' Project bi-annual open mic on the National Mall, adjacent to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. I also thank the current generation of combat veterans who spent most of the day with us. **Donations are appreciated to help pay for the tent and sound system.** For additional information, visit our website at www.memorialdaywritersproject.com

Jonathan Myer's songs for Veterans Day, 2013

1. New Guinea Strafers. (Tune: *Bell-Bottom Trousers.*) Borrowed from Oscar Brand's 1961-Elektra record "Out of the Blue," this World War II song describes how a brand new pilot gets assigned to a unit which (against all common sense!) flies not only "too low" but also "too slow" over enemy territory ... and how his fellow pilots rebel against their autocratic commander. What they did with a flare gun and what else they wish they had done with it may have been wishful thinking, but such is typical of war: it brings out the insanity in many who are at "the pointy end of the spear" in crazy conditions.

2. Call Out the Goddam Reserves. (Tune: *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean.*) Borrowed from Oscar Brand's 1956-Elektra record, "The Wild Blue Yonder," this song dates from the Korean War, during which the Regular Air Force enjoys life during peacetime, but relies on the Reserves when they "get into trouble." At least, that's how it seemed to activated Reservists, and who's to say they were wrong?

3. Itazuke Tower. (Tune: *Wabash Cannonball.*) Another borrowed from Brand's "Wild Blue Yonder" album, the alternating verses describe how a Korean-era P-51 pilot tries to deal with a recalcitrant control tower operator when he gets into trouble — in the P-51 "Mustang," the emergency was often a leaky radiator resulting in overheated coolant and incipient engine failure (as in a car). In the classic version, the unsympathetic tower operator denies landing clearance, and the hapless aviator winds up in "Pilot's Heaven." But in an added pair of verses, the pilot, now in a supersonic "fighting F-15," scares the tower weenie into granting a landing clearance after all.

4. Warrior Bards. (*Tune: All Around the Water Tank.*) "Yodelin' Irv" LeVine wrote this tribute to his fellow-SEA singer-songwriters by coupling their names with their best-known songs, most of which were based in the LBJ-McNamara era. Jonathan added more fellow FACs — and took the so-called Vietnam War through the 1972 "Christmas bombing" campaign, which led to the release of (most of) the POWs from their "Hanoi Hilton" captivity, followed by the ignominious ending of the U.S.'s role when "Congress left the South [Vietnam] bereft/By cutting off the funds." The rest (as they say) is history: the communist North captured all of the South in 1975 and the adjoining countries of Laos and Cambodia also fell (to the Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge, respectively), and an additional 2 million or so Asian lives were lost to the continuing combat, "re-education camps," attempts to flee South Vietnam, and the "Killing Fields" of Cambodia.

5. 58,000 Names Carved in a Wall. (*Original poem by Native-American Johnnie Rainwater; the song "50,000 Names ... " © by Jamie Ohare and popularized by George Jones; numbers updated first by Irv LeVine and currently by JM.*) This most poignant of memorials focuses on the tearful visits of family members "Searching for a boy from long ago" — and souvenirs they leave behind. The current number of names has risen to fifty-eight thousand, two hundred, and eighty-six (58,286).

6. Answering ... and Answered: The 9-11 Call. (*Tune: Battle Hymn of the Republic.*) Here, Jonathan combined his two songs, the first about 2001's deadly attack against the U.S. — another "date which will live in infamy" — with the U.S.'s vengeance ten years later with the killing of Osama bin Laden, head of *al-Qaeda*, in [Abbottabad](#), Pakistan. The first half focuses on our country's outrage and the central values of our Western civilization; the second on the effort expended in bringing bin Laden "to justice": Although "Vengeance [may be] mine, saith the Lord," clearly He can sometimes use a leetle help. However, the "Arab Spring" of two years ago has faded into continuing and expanding strife, even while the U.S. seeks to extricate itself from the costly military activities of the past decade.

7. Sher-Babes. (*By Toby Hughes.*) One of the best of the SEA War balladeers, Toby named his F-4 after his wife. His unit callsign was "Sharkbait," and it was based in III Corps, from which its F-4 fighter-bombers could fly anywhere they were needed. In this case, the air support was needed during the 1968 battle for Khe Sanh, an outpost located in the northwest corner of "Eye" Corps' Quang Tri Province a bare few kilometers south of the DMZ and east of Laos. The battle lasted from January 21st to July 9th. "On the thirty-third day of the fight," Toby and his wingman put in one of the battle's innumerable airstrikes — against an enemy truck park his "Covey" FAC had found. "Hit as he pulled off the bomb run, "the rest of the song covers the tense sequence of events as he manages to bring his deteriorating F-4 to an emergency landing at Da Nang, where ... "She dies as her wheels touch the ground."

8. The Aging Pilot. (*Tune " Streets of Laredo."*) In this quasi-autobiographical lyric, Jonathan contrasts the active flying career of his youth with the advancing decrepitude of old age. Fortunately, the nostrums available in parallel not only enable "better living through chemistry" (if you can call it "living"), but also the avoidance of embarrassment when performing a certain bodily function....

9. "Willie" Wilbanks' One-Man War. (*Tune: Jesse James.*) This 1997 ballad is Jonathan's tribute to Capt. Hilliard Almond "Willie" Wilbanks, a classmate at O-1E FAC School in early 1966, who sacrificed his life near the end of his own Vietnam tour to save an estimated 130 Vietnamese and U.S. Army Rangers from annihilation by a much larger enemy force. For his conspicuous gallantry, he was awarded the U.S. Air Force's second (and first posthumous) Medal of Honor of the SEA War.

10. Raven FACero. (*From Jim Roper, a "Raven" FAC.*) As the "Ropeman" would introduce it, "This song doesn't have a single dirty word in it." Suggestive (and mythical, one hopes), but not quite X-rated ... unless one translates the "code words." The Raven FACs' story is best told in Christopher Robbins's *Raven*, which not only follows the combat careers of some of those FACs (Jim's piano-playing is mentioned), but also contains a precursor chapter on how the civil strife in Laos evolved as a "secret war" ... wherein USAF FACs, "separated" from their own Service and flying in civilian clothes (without ID) ... reported to the American Ambassador while flying combat for the Royal Laotian Army's Lieut. General Vang Pao (an ethnic Hmong) and his troops in their fight against the communist Pathet Lao.

11. Last Flight. (*Tune: Bad Lee Brown, more or less.*) Song-writing can be a patchwork affair: Jonathan said he started this memoir in the middle (anticipating the death of a cousin), and it "morphed" into his own memoir about flying — in both peacetime and war — and the losses that accrued throughout both environments. In anticipation of some day joining his comrades ... if he can't find them in Heaven, he'll carouse with them in Hell.

12. Glory Flying Regulations (III: SEA to GWOT). (*Tune: Battle Hymn of the Republic.*) Evolving from yet another Oscar Brand rendition — which contrasted the excitement of combat flying (in World War II) with the post-war chicken-shit rules and regulations that dampened everybody's spirits — Jonathan updated the verses to highlight the hazards of the SEA War with the routine, debilitating conditions of peacetime flying and its effects on his generation of daring flyers. Beyond that (now-40 year-old) war, he notes the advent of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and even reaches back to a past Presidential observation to predict flying conditions in the foreseeable future. ... But then, who can trust a fighter pilot — even if he did fly interceptors?