

Action Report: Memorial Day Writers' Project (MDWP)

Activity: A Tribute to our Veterans

Date: November 11, 2015

Location: Washington, DC

(Constitution Ave., and 20 St.) behind the sidewalk facing Constitution Ave.

Weather: Somewhere in the mid 60s (degrees), cloudless blue sky.



The weather was great! Temperature was in the mid 60s with an occasional breeze. We got to hear more songs and more poetry from our participants and everyone had more time at the mic. Barbara Morris helped at the front display table and sold books and CD's, and chatted with people interested in MDWP books and the photo display.



Dick Morris started us off from the front of the tent. Dick was a rifle platoon leader with A Co. 2nd Bn 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division in '67 and '68. Dick sang tunes from his CD "Skytroopers," (lyrics can be seen at www.vietwarongs.com. His CD is available at <http://cdbaby.com/cd/richardmorris>). One of his songs, "Digging' a Hole," was a Finalist in the Vocal Jazz & Blues category of the 23rd Annual Mid-Atlantic Song Contest. (www.saw.org/masc.asp). Richard also wrote a novel "Cologne No. 10 for Men," fiction that grew out of his songs and experiences in Vietnam. The following lists the songs sung by Dick:

- "Charlie," an alluring song about Richard's elusive friend, Charlie.
- "John Wesley," a song about a 1st Cavalry Division point man who volunteered for point for an entire year and killed a dozen VC.
- "The Bong Song Bridge," a catchy tune about the easy time spent guarding the Bong Song Bridge.
- "Digging a Hole," about fox holes and sleeping holes dug to protect all grunts.
- "When's The Sun Gonna Shine On Camp Evans?" monsoon season at the northern HQ of the 1st Cav.
- "Lonesome for You," a love song from Richard to his wife, Barbara.
- "Chanh Giao Cave," a song about the Rockpile Operation of A Co. 2/5, a 13-day siege where 179 NVA were extracted from holes between the rocks.

Jonathan Myer played the first five of his 14 ballads for the day, accompanied by his 12-string Fender guitar. Jonathan flew the single-engine tail-dragging O-1E "Bird Dog" as an Air Force Forward Air Controller (FAC) performing visual reconnaissance (VR) missions punctuated by air strikes against planned targets or in support of troops in contact with enemy forces (TICs).

His tour covered April 1966 through February 1967, mostly as a province or sector FAC in Kontum Province, but with a 3-1/2 week stint flying out of Dong Ha's Marine Corps air base (in I ["Eye"] Corps' Quang Tri province just below the Demilitarized Zone [DMZ]). His songs, mostly featuring the O-1E, are listed below.

1. Teeny Weeny Bird Dog
2. There Are No Freaking REMFs in Vietnam
3. Warrior Bards (+ Our War)
4. "Willie" Wilbanks' One-Man War
5. Your "Flying Special."
6. 58,000 Names Carved in a Wall
7. FAC and the Green Beret
8. "Bird Dog" Pilots' Heaven
9. The Bird Dog Cannonball
10. Beer Call in the Boonies
11. Coyote Four-One
12. A Death in the Dak Na Valley
13. Different Missions
14. The Dumbest Thing

If you are interested in Jonathan Myer's songs, those of the three (of five) military songfests recorded by our then-Society of Old Bold Aviators (SOBA), or other of his fellow "warrior bards" who had "been there, done that, and had the T-shirts" (etc.), contact Jonathon at at: jbmmyer@gmail.com.

Sistah Joy, a local community activist and performance poet, read a poem entitled



"*Remembrance*," a tribute to those who have left us with a strong imprint in our mind and our heart, long after they have gone; "*Humanities Legacy*," a poem presented as part of a tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King at the US Department of State, and "*I Proudly Wear the Flag*" an affirmation of the meaning of the flag and noble precepts it should represent. 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 a monthly poetry event at Annie's Art

Gallery in Camp Springs, Maryland.

Richard (Dick) Epstein, our host, read from his chapbook *Another Time Another Place*. **Bob Doubek**, former USAF Intelligence Officer, provided insightful background on what it took to make the Vietnam Veterans Memorial a reality. Bob was in charge of building the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and is the author of *Creating the Vietnam Memorial: The Inside Story*. **Dave Martin** (AKA Quaser) read several of his poems including a ghostly story that took place in Vietnam. **Ron Bunston**, a native American who lives in Canada and survivor of the Ia Drang gave an interesting reading about his native background and his tour in Vietnam. **Nina Wagner** came by as we were closing down and read several new poems she recently wrote. Nina rotated in and out of Afghanistan as a civilian contractor for the DoD.

At the conclusion of the day's activities, we had a great meal and intense conversation at Nam Viet in Arlington. We, as artists of every persuasion, come to the MDWP Tent and the Wall to remember in our unique way and remember we do. The above is a fairly accurate recap of the day's activity at the Writer's Tent. 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 Memorial Day.

Jonathan Myer's Song Notes:

1. **Teeny Weeny Bird Dog.** (1997.) This was Jonathan Myer's first song since he had "DEROSed" from the RVN some 30 years before, in 1967. It's one of his *homages* to the incongruous little airplane that flew in all SEA environments, flown by all the Services in its several variations, valued for its flexibility and utility. For us Air Force FACs, its primary missions were visual reconnaissance (VRs) and control of air strikes, both Preplanned (based on intelligence) and Immediate (for fleeting targets and, especially, friendly troops in contact with enemy forces — TICs).

2. **There Are No Freaking REMFs in Vietnam.** (2001. *Tune: "There Are No Fighter Pilots Down in Hell."*) The FAC Association (for those of us who flew the slower O-1 "Bird Dog," O-2 "Super Skymaster" aka "Oscar Deuce" or OV-10 "Bronco") was formed in September, 2000, at our first reunion in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. We soon had a growing database of fellow FACs, a website, and a FAC Net to exchange reminiscences and information. About a year later, one incautious soul ventured that he "didn't think we had any REMFs in Vietnam" (short for "rear echelon [maternal fornicators].") The FAC Net came alive for several days of stories about support weinies and other behind-the-lines types who'd make trouble for those of us "at the pointy end of the spear." Jonathan collected the best of them and wove them into this slong.

3. **Warrior Bards (+ Our War).** (1998/2015. *Tune: "Waiting for a Train."*) What began as "Yodelin' Irv" LeVine's tribute to his fellow singer-songwriters induced Jonathan to add progressively more verses to chronicle how and why our "Vietnam War" ended — with military victories squandered by social and political pressures to end the war no matter what. While the return of (most of) the "Hanoi Hilton" POWs signalled the war's end for the U.S.A. and its allies (punctuated by the Congress's denial of further funds), North Vietnam's total violation of the "Paris Accords" led to its conquest of South Vietnam two years later. What President Reagan later called "a noble cause" that bought time for other nations to put down their own communist insurgencies — also validated the "Domino Theory," as both Laos and Cambodia also fell to their communist foes . . . with a total loss of Asian lives estimated at an additional 2-to-3 millions . . . with little notice by most of a U.S. of A. that had become too introverted to care. *

4. **"Willie" Wilbanks' One-Man War.** (1997. *Tune: "Jesse James."*) Starting from Willie's posthumous MOH citation, Jonathan researched his FAC School classmate's final mission. That day's conflict emerged as a sequence of complexity but Willie's heroism and sacrifice were indisputable: with fighters still distant and Army helicopter gunships still minutes away, Willie, who had spotted the enemy ambush awaiting what would be their third massacre of the day, determined to alert the friendly force — a unit of Vietnamese Army Rangers and their U.S. Army Ranger advisors. He first fired his smoke rockets from his O-1F "Bird Dog" until they were gone, then began firing his M-16 rifle out of a side window. The enemy, having lost the element of surprise, both charged the approaching Rangers and fired at Willie's aircraft. On his third pass, he was seen to lose control and crashed inverted. Initial attempts to rescue him were driven off, but when his ALO (Air Liaison Officer) could cover a friendly helicopter, Willie was pulled out of the wreckage and transported to the

hospital facility at Bao Loc; he died on the way. It was estimated that his actions not only killed enemy but saved 130 friendly lives.

5. Your “Flying Special.” (2001. *Tune: “The Midnight Special.”*) Every combat flyer considers his aircraft as “special” — particularly after it’s taken him into harm’s way and brought him back again many times. From FACs flying reconnaissance (“recce”) over “province, DMZ or the Trail . . . looking for the Charlies,” to “choppers . . . in and out of LZs” (landing zones, often under fire), and whether flying from “carriers or solid ground,” they all need to watch out for ground fire . . . which could “ruin your day.” This was especially true if flying over Hanoi (aka “Downtown,” in Route Pack 6), where defenses were the most lethal and residence in the “Hanoi Hilton” (as POWs) or burial “six feet under ground” awaited the unlucky.

6. 58,000 Names Carved in a Wall. After Robert Doubek discussed his book *Creating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: The Inside Story*, whereby “Our Wall” was dedicated in 1982, Jonathan sang “58,000 Names,” as one of the results of that project. Some history: in 1994, Jamie O’hara wrote the lyrics to “50,000 Names,” which was popularized by the late George Jones. In 2005, Viet Vet Irv LeVine sang it during our last Society of Old Bold Aviators (SOBA) concert at the Red River Rats’ reunion in Washington D.C., but he steadily increased the number of names from 59,000 to more than 58,000. Since then, Jonathan has further upgraded that total as additional names have been officially added; the current number is 58,307. That song has become our hymn to what Maya Lin’s Wall stands for: a by-name recognition of all the military lives lost during the 20 years of United States involvement in our Southeast Asia War, and the power of her simple design has made it a magnet both for bereaved families and for visitors from around the world.

7. FAC and the Green Beret. (1967. *Tune: “Wabash Cannonball.”*) Jonathan wrote this song as the finale on a tape of all the dirty songs he then knew, and made copies for his roommate Lee Goettche (“Getchee”; Cagey 83) and all the Green Beret A-teams in Kontum and Pleiku Provinces. These provinces comprised the 24th Special Tactical Zone (24 STZ) as their proximity to the Tri-Border area (where the Republic of Viet Nam adjoined both Laos and Cambodia), was deemed a region with natural infiltration routes from the Ho Chi Minh Trail east into South Vietnam. The song includes several facts, both of the times and Jonathan’s own experiences . . . woven into a spoof whereby a snotty FAC and anxious Green Beret radio operator seek fighter support when the A-team patrol comes under fire. A couple of years later, Green Berets and their “Walt” FACs would sing their respective roles at Nha Trang’s military club — a fact Jonathan didn’t learn until 1995, when he was given a copy of Green Beret “Bucky” Burruss’s account of his own tours in *Mike Force*. The song remains the favorite of some Viet Vets today.

8. “Bird Dog” Pilots’ Heaven. (2001. *Tune: “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” roughly.*) With each verse beginning “In ‘Bird Dog’ pilots’ heaven. . .,” one can anticipate the wishful thinking and exaggerated claims that will follow. Hey, after a few beers, no claim should be dismissed . . . unless it can be topped by one even more outrageous. (It works for fighter pilots, so why not for those of us FACs who told their fighters where to go and what to do with themselves when they got there?)

9. The Bird Dog Cannonball. (2015. *Tune: “Wabash Cannonball.”*) Written 18 years after “Teeny Weeny Bird Dog,” and to one of the most popular tunes for all sorts of moving “vehicules,” this mixed description of what his O-1E could and couldn’t do. Jonathan says it provides a final “bookend” to all his “Bird Dog” songs. Why “final”? Because with all his

other songs featuring the Bird Dog, he says he's run out of themes. Meanwhile, Bird Dogs of various models — both O-1s and L-19s — fly on in the hands of their private owners, many in the International Birddog Association, or IBDA.

10. Beer Call in the Boonies. (2010. *Tune: "Little Old Sod Shanty."*) This ballad comprises the actual story of Jonathan's May 1966 trip from Kontum to Saigon where Jonathan saw the "Saigon Commando" who inspired his wishful fantasy of 1997, "FAC Meets Saigon Commando." As he tells it, "Beer Call" was "one of the songs I didn't see how I could write — until I did it": planning to bring beer back to Kontum to break its FACs' "drought"; his readiness to cut his taxi-driver's throat at the first sign of an ambush; his dinner with John Perry, the Cagey 82 whose call-sign he inherited; buying his first 35-mm and Super-8 movie cameras; the joyful welcome he received upon returned to Kontum with 20 cases of beer; and the retrospective recognition of what was really important to those in a combat theater — mail from home, and a steady supply of beer!

11. Coyote Four-One. (1990.) FACing over the DMZ had its moments of excitement and humor, but also tragedy . . . and ultimate revelation. Tally Ho missions were scheduled around the clock (weather permitting), and this sortie was a night flight, with an FNG ("fairly new guy/or gal") in Jonathan's back seat. As he tells it, "I was controlling 'Coyote' flight, a pair of two-seat F-4Cs, and Coyote 41 misjudged their altitude on an attack pass and plowed a fiery furrow into the ground. The F-4's final transmission, "Oh, shit!" (he learned more recently) was typical of flyers when they realize at the last moment that they are doomed. Thirty years later, his discovery of their names on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial (VVM) was enabled by Mike "Loadhacker" Sloniker, the Red River Rats' expert on "The Wall," who told him how to match dates of death (in this case October 13, 1966) with names on the Wall and their details in the VVM's Directory of Names.

12. A Death in the Dak Na Valley. (*Tune: "Omie Wise."*) The first name on a list of FACs KIA is "Arthur J. Abramoff." Flying as Cagey 86 in a hilly area north of Kontum Province's Dak To town and air base, Art's Bird Dog was downed by ground fire as he was marking an enemy position on 20 January 1967. This ballad integrates the accounts of fellow-FAC DeVere Henderson (who took control after Art's crash), three of the two U.S. Army UH-1B "Huey" helicopters' four pilots who took part in the rescue attempt, and the combat journal of fellow-FAC Vance Leuthold. Art's Army Observer (1LT Hull, a newly assigned MACV Intel Officer) had survived the crash, crawled away to hide, and luckily was picked up by "Black Cat 606," the first Huey on-scene; Major Leuthold, who had boarded the second Huey "Mardi Gras 730" at Kontum, jumped out near the smoking wreckage . . . but Art was beyond help. Leuthold was awarded a Silver Star for his action. On May 1, 2006, Art's alma mater, New York University, dedicated a student lounge in its New York City downtown campus to his memory. DeVere and I were there, and this tribute was played from my CD, *in memoriam*.

13. Different Missions. (Poem by Bill Rothas. *Tune: Jimmie Rodgers' "Waiting for a Train."*) Rothas was an EB-66 pilot while his Aviation Cadet classmate Dick Allee was flying the F-105 "Thunderchief" fighter-bomber (aka "Thud"). Rothas's mission was stand-off jamming, while Allee's was an air strike, callsign "Scotch Two." Dick Allee's "Mayday" call gave his bearing as 60 nautical miles east of TACAN channel 89; "Crown" was the area EC-130 "AB Triple-C" (airborne command, control and communications) aircraft for the area, and "Sandy" was the callsign for A-1E fighter-bombers when flying rescue support. The "different missions" of December 21, 1968, had different endings: Allee was declared MIA (later KIA in the crash), while Rothas and comrades mourned that night at the Takhli

Officers' Club. Rothas's poem was published in the *Air Force Times*, which (he explained in our phone call) got him in trouble: his commander thought his description of the EB-66 flying "safe and sound" made his unit look bad. . . .

14. The Dumbest Thing. (2002. Tune: *Talking Blues*) "*The dumbest thing a flyer can do — And this is no lie, I'm telling you — Is starve the engine till it quits. . . . It's enough to give you the running shits — And I'm fearless. . . . Did it twice — And lived to tell about it . . . both times!*" The first time I was in the middle of an airstrike in the Dak Aoi valley at 4,000 ft, a known VC area, and with Army CPT Lee Bourdon (Kontum's Intel chief) in my backseat. I knew immediately what was wrong: I had neglected to switch fuel tanks earlier to keep my fuel in balance, and my engine reminded me of that fact . . . by going on strike. So I switched tanks, the engine caught, and I didn't even miss a word on the radio as we finished the strike. The second time I realized (a leetle late) that I was stretching my fuel, so I set up for a best-endurance return to base (RTB) and hoped for the best. Not quite soon enough, as my engine quit a couple of miles from touchdown. However, I nursed my glide, made it to the runway safely . . . and the engine restarted once my tail wheel hit the ground, so i didn't even need a tow — proving yet again that "*it's much more better to be lucky than smart!*" (Whew!)

Books and CD's by MDWP Presenters

- **Robert Doubeck**, *Creating the Vietnam Memorial: The Inside Story*
- **Joseph Underwood**, *The Eight Said No*. a sailor's story from the desk of the USS Hornet and USS North Carolina, in the battle for the South Pacific.
- **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.
- **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 Bid Dog* and CD's from the Society of Old Bold Aviators. Order from: jbmmyer@gmail.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 brother **Briah "Gunny" Conner** .

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.dick_epstein@hotmail.com.

God Bless.

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. 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.