
Action Report: Memorial Day Writers' Project (MDWP)

Activity: A Tribute to our Veterans

Date: May 28, 2018

Location: Washington, DC

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

Weather: Mid 70s (degrees), Cloudy with forecast of occasional thunderstorms.



Early participants of the Memorial Day Writers' Project: Clyde Wray, Daryl Solomonson, Mike McDonnell, Suellen Manning, Ed Henry, Cathy Solomonson, Dick Epstein (L-R).



Ed Henry, Clyde Wray, Mike McDonnell, Dick Epstein (L-R).

For the MDWP 25th anniversary, we had the pleasure of listening to the poetry, prose and song from several of the original MDWP members from 1993: Clyde Wray, Ed Henry, Mike McDonnell, Tom McLean and Cathy Solomonson. Each overflowing with artistic talent. Our host, **Dick Epstein**, started us off with a prayer for our veterans and read the names of past participants who were with us in spirit: Vince Kaspar, Rod Kane, Drof Droge, Roy Correnti, Dick Morris, and Emily Strange.

USA **Tom McLean** (USA, Military Police) started us off. Tom served in Qui Nhon as an MP and was one of the early participants of the MDWP. Tom sang three original songs: "*Aging Veteran*," "*Living in Other's Dreams*," and "*Conversation with Grandfather*." His first song focuses on the demons of war (Agent Orange in this case) still chasing our veterans today, challenging them, and putting them into early graves. "*Living in Other's Dreams*" A song about a boy who died young serving his country and now only lives in the dreams of others. Tom's third song "Conversation with Grandfather," is a mythical conversation with Tom's Civil War ancestors about the state of veterans then and now. Tom's maternal Great Grandfather Giuseppe Arancio became known as Joseph Orange and was a just-off-the-boat Italian immigrant who joined the 12th MA Infantry. After being captured, he spent 11 months in Andersonville. Tom's Paternal Great Great Grandfather (Oliver McLean) was 2nd generation Scotch-Irish and was in the 53rd GA Infantry. He died from wounds suffered at Antietam. There is no need for Dylan or Guthrie when we have singer/songwriter Tom McLean. The image of the female VC (above) was in the digital camera I



used on Memorial Day; she was either lurking behind the MDWP tent on the National Mall or she was a spirit—waiting.



USN **Ed Henry** (Navy Corpsman attached to the Marines) was up next. Ed gave an introduction and background to the Memorial Day Writers Project, explaining the history and briefly talked about its founders. He also read two original poems involving a typical conversation between a battle hardened gunny at the Veterans Administration and a member of their psychology staff offering ever-helpful guidance and expertise.

USA **Clyde Wray** (11B with the 199th Light Infantry Brigade) started off with a poem “Gunny” he wrote as a tribute to our friend, USMC Captain, Briah Conner who passed away last year. Clyde also read one of my favorites “*For Those Who Were Scared Shitless,*” and “*Of Common Ground*” which tells of the need and difficulty in writing about the veteran experience. Clyde wrote a new piece looking back on life- saving conversations between an army drill sergeant and a green recruit.



Judy King, up from Tennessee, read the words to her award-winning song “The Spirit of the Wall.” Judy reported that her song is being used in a documentary.



USMC **Mike McDonnell** read a poem in tribute to medic **Rod Kane**, one of the original founders of the MDWP. The poem “*It’s My Job*” tells about life of a medic in combat. Mike also read a poem by co-founder **Vince Kaspar**: “*Bill’s Candle*” which tells about a soldier spending time with his loved one back in the states every Saturday night while the soldier was in Vietnam and “*Enough Hugs*” which seeks to answer the question of when the ghosts of Vietnam will be laid to rest; a poem written by USMC platoon commander **V.K. Inman** “*Bluebird Days*” (a response to a letter from a 10-year old student) and “*Go Noi*” recalling the beauty of Vietnam despite the war. Mike ended his session with several of his own poems: “*Magilla,*” “*The Trip IV and V*” which recalls the memories of friends who died in Que Son, Hue and Phu Bai.

USANC **Cathy Solomonson** read a poem written by Emily Strange “*Job Description*” a poem that tells us about the life of a Donut Dollie in Vietnam. Emily was assigned to the 9th Infantry Division and Mobile Riverine Force. Emily passed away in 2016.



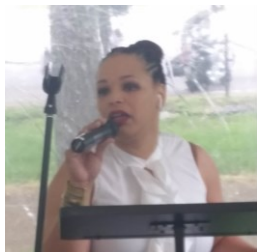
NSA specialist **Tom Glenn**, started off with the WWI poem “*Flanders Fields*” by John McCrae. Tom also read from the introduction and from the last chapter of his award winning book “*Last of the Annamese*” which describes the life of a signal intelligence officer in I Corps and as well as the difficulties and chaos during the fall of Saigon.



In memory of **Richard Morris** (A Co. 2nd Bn 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division in '67 and '68) **Barbara Morris** read, "*The Literary Life ... and The Literary Death ... Memorial Day for Writers.*" Barbara began with a video of her husband, Richard, [https://www.dropbox.com/s/3uxipnv6hda21z2/Richard](https://www.dropbox.com/s/3uxipnv6hda21z2/RichardMorrisMemorialMDWP.mp4?dl=0)



Morris Memorial MDWP.mp4?dl=0 singing two of three songs: "*What is my Legacy?*" "*Sunny Days,*" and "*I Needed a Girl Like Barb'ra.*" Barbara donated copies of Richard's *Skytroopers* CD which may also be purchased at www.cdbaby.com/cd/richardmorris. Lyrics are at www.vietwarsongs.com. Richard's novels including *Cologne No. 10 for Men* are available on Amazon and Kindle. Richard's blogposts may be read at <https://richardmorrisauthor.wordpress.com/blog/>.



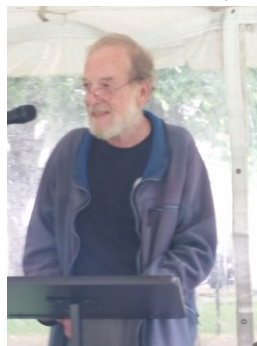
Through a brief association with the Armed Services Arts Partnership (ASAP) which holds classes in creative arts and holds an open mic at the Dog Tag Bakery in Georgetown, we gained **Hazel No Last Name** and **N. Barry Carver**. Hazel sang several songs and was a big hit with the audience.

N. Barry Carver, a disabled Army vet, recited a piece which highlighted our continuous dedication to each other - even beyond our service to any government, religion, or branch of service. He told the story of Bacon's Rebellion and the brave sea captain/small businessman at its center... who defied his king's will to stand up for his community's need. He pointed out that this pre-patriot had no flag, or pledge, or constitution to defend but made all those things possible by paying the ultimate price - a hundred years (nearly to the day) before the Declaration of Independence was inked. Finally, he revealed that he was the 8th great-grandson of that Captain William Carver and, as a member of an unbroken change of service, both public and military, he thanked us for making, in his words, "a country worthy of such service."

Reva Hamilton read a piece about each generational member from her family who went to war in service to their country. Reva and I participate in the same poetry workshop (Poets on the Fringe) and meet weekly at the Georgetown Library.



USA **Jim Smith**, 11B with the 25th Infantry Division, representing VVA Chapter 641 of Silver Spring, MD, read several pieces relating to his time spent in Vietnam. Jim read "*Veterans' Banquet,*" an interesting and bizarre tale capturing a moment in reaction to a Vietnam victory celebration; "*Two Years Later*"—about Jim's time in a rainstorm at a '67 folk festival and another rainstorm in the Iron Triangle; "*Listening Post*"—about the lingering effect of LP duty in the dark in Vietnam and after returning back home; "*War Souvenir*"—about taking a wallet from a dead North Vietnamese



containing a photo of the dead soldiers girlfriend; "*Washing the Wall*"—Jim's observation while washing the Wall in Washington DC with his fellow VVA Chapter buddies.



USA **Gerry Ney** was OIC of an Imagery Interpretation Section in the 172nd Military Intelligence Detachment with the 173rd. 173rd Airborne at LZ English, Binh Dinh Province, II Corps. 07/13/68-07/12/69. Gerry started off with "*An Irish Mensch*," in tribute to his friend, Jerry McManus, who passed away from the effects of Agent Orange. Another poem triggered by watching "*Saving Pvt Ryan*," a tribute to 1st Lt.

Anderson "Skip" Renshaw, who served with the 1st Air Cav and was killed on Easter Sunday 1969, four days after returning from R&R with his wife in Hawaii; "*The Leaf Rider*," a look at the war and effect on soldiers in the format of Tolkien's "*Song of Eorl the Young*"; "*Unedea What When?*," a satirical look at military supply from actual events over three decades; "*Sarge*," (In Memory of Harold "Sarge" Schaefer) - VVA's longtime national convention sergeant-at-arms who passed away from Agent Orange; "*Pass the Pipe and Sugar Cane... Light on the Shrapnel, Please*," - a photo ID mission with the Montagnards gets hot and surreal; "*Purple Leaves*," (dedicated to Paul Sutton) looking at the immediate aftermath of Ranch Hand spraying south of Mang Yang Pass in an L-19 Bird Dog from 8,000 ft.; and "*O Johnny, Where Have You Gone?*," - subtitled "*For Those Who Haven't Come Home*"; a look at vets whose minds are still back in Vietnam. Gerry lost 70 lbs. since we saw him last. Congrats Gerry!

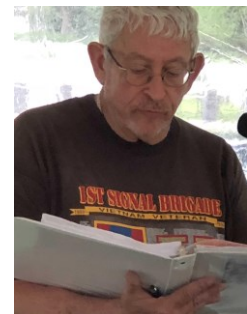
USN **Paul Berg**, with us for the first time, read from his recent book "*Sandra's Hands*," (a reflective journey from the U.S. Enterprise in support of Rolling Thunder to the siege of Wounded Knee). Paul selected targets for A6's and F4's based on the USS Enterprise.



USAF Captain **Jonathan Myer**, flew the O-1E "Bird Dog," a single-engine tail-dragger that cruised at 80 mph; most of his 1966 – 67 tour was as a Kontum Province Forward Air Controller (FAC) in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, with 3-1/2 weeks flying over the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between South and North Vietnam in the Fall of 1966. Jonathan sang 10 songs in two sets, most of them ballads about his tour in Southeast Asia set to traditional melodies. *Additional details of these wonderful tunes are provided at the end of this report.*

USA **Dick Epstein** read several original poems throughout the day and tried to keep everything moving along including a quick change of amplifiers for the sound system and batteries for the microphones.

Conclusion: 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.



A Special thanks to **Brenda Myer** and **Barbara Morris** for helping out with book and CD sales at the front table and to **Reva Hamilton** for taking photos. And thank you to all of you who participated and to those who help sponsors MDWP activities on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Special thanks to **VVA 227** and **VVA 641** for their monetary support. Our thoughts go out to **Briah "Gunny" Conner, Richard Morris, Emily Strange and Roy Correnti** who are always with us in spirit.

If you have any suggestions for corporate sponsorship, or to make our event better, let me know. Don't forget to visit our website: www.memorialdaywritersproject.com or contact me at dick_epstein@hotmail.com. God Bless.

[ADDITIONAL DETAILS provided by **Jonathan Myer** describing the songs he sang throughout the day: *The Dumbest Thing, My Peace Song, Pink Elephant Polka, Tally Ho, Warrior Bards (III), Coyote Four-One (II), FAC and the Green Beret, Glory Flying Regulations, Willie' Wilbanks' One-Man War, Your 'Flying Special.*

According to www.poets.org: "A typical ballad is a plot-driven song, with one or more characters hurriedly unfurling events leading to a dramatic conclusion..." (Hmm.) I prefer to claim my ballads are "stories set to rhyme and a tune." Within that approach, I've documented many experiences, mostly as a FAC: a few tragic, more humorous, some historical, some mythical, and a few combining themes I'd originally considered impossible to capture. . . .

1. **"The Dumbest Thing." (Talking Blues: E):** Some say confession is good for the soul. Well, it took until the Third Millennium for this one. Or I should say, two — the number of times my Bird Dog's engine stopped ... in flight. The first was in active combat, namely over the Dak Akoi river valley at 4,000 ft altitude, maybe 50 clicks NE of Kontum with our MAC-V's Intel Officer in my backseat. Without a word I switched the fuel tanks, the engine caught, and our strike went on....

Some months later, I was flying higher and farther NE of Kontum and saw my fuel was getting a leetle low. So I leaned mixture and set up a long-range course for our field. Ten miles out, field in sight, I set the throttle to idle. Three miles out, the engine quit, but I managed to reach the runway. Then, with the tail wheel down, the engine restarted ... and I just taxied to our ramp. Both true, but sound better in song!

2. **"My Peace Song." ("Down By the River Side"):** Some tunes just pop up when needed. Brenda and I were driving south to Atlanta, where fellow-FAC "Willie" Wilbanks, our Air Force's second (and first posthumous) Medal of Honor of our Southeast Asia War, was going to be inducted into Georgia's Hall of Fame. By then I

had retired and was learning how and why we had lost that war. Army Colonel Harry G. Summers had told his North Vietnam Army counterpart (NVA Colonel Tu, in a meeting in Hanoi a week before Saigon fell): “You know you never beat us on the battlefield.” Tu replied, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.” So this “peace song” spoof is a list of wishful thinking, whereby successes on the battlefield do make the difference – in our good old American way.

3. **“Pink Elephant Polka.” (Fake Polka: C+2):** This is a true story of a mission I flew near the tri-border area where the western border of South Vietnam meets the eastern borders of Cambodia and Laos. I saw two pink-colored elephants walking toward me, loosed one of my four 2.75-inch “Mighty Mouse” marking rockets at them — and missed. I made a 360-degree turn for another shot, but felt a bump as if I was flying through my own prop-wash. It unnerved me, though, so I headed back to Kontum. My report to Intelligence was met with laughter and an accusation of too much drink; also that the “bump” may well have been an ambush attempt — one shot only, to avoid revealing the gunner’s position. A couple of days later, with an Army helicopter pilot in my back seat, I got my witness: “They sure are pink!” I tried to meet him again at a Helo Reunion in Washington, D.C. in the year 2000, but he got sick, headed for home, and we never met. Fortunately, a couple of FACs at a later FAC reunion said they too had seen “pink” elephants; probably from rolling in reddish mud....

4 **“Tally Ho.” (“Engine One-Forty-Three”: C+2):** “Tally Ho” was the mission’s name, and also its operational area, namely the (so-called) Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnams, the “DMZ.” O-1 “Bird Dogs” flew in it around the clock (weather permitting) for nearly a year, July 1966 to June ’67. I flew (as a fill-in) from late September through mid-October 1966, during which I flew 32 missions (earning a month off my tour), and painted its shield: a fox-hunting rider bouncing up and down on his saddle, captioned “TALLY-HO! / THERE GOES THE LITTLE RED S.O.B.” (per the joke about a Texan and his first British fox hunt). I tried to stay on, but made the mistake of returning to Kontum to pick up mail and clothes — and my ALO made me stay.

In 2002, fellow-FAC Cal Anderson (our Association’s first president) gave me the early and closing history of Tally Ho, this becoming the first of four about events during those 3-1/2 busy weeks....

5. **“Warrior Bards (III).” (“Waiting for a Train”: E):** During the five years our Society of Old Bold Aviators (SOBA) put on a mostly flyers’ songfest at the then-Fort Myer Officers’ Club, “Yodelin-Irv” LeVine was a regular. One of his songs was about fellow-Viet Vet singer-song writers and the Johnson-McNamara era: “Warrior Bards” (c. 1998-9). In 2008, I swapped my place for Ron Barker (who flew both the O-1E

and F-100), and put myself after FACs “Raven Jim” Roper and Dave MacKay (then playing as “The Three Facéros”). In 2010 and 2014, I added four verses to cover the Nixon-Kissenger era and the policies and events that ended in disaster — not only for South Vietnam but also Laos and Cambodia, the rest of Indochina ... and the 58,000+ names “on that cold black Wall.”

6. **“Coyote Four-One (II).” (Tune unknown: E):** This story begins with my orders from Kontum to Dong Ha, the Marine Corps base in I (“Eye”) Corps hosting Tally Ho. (Omitted: I over-nighted at Da Nang’s Navy section, where (a) I dined on a huge tenderloin steak, (b) bought a bottle of the most costly cognac in-country [at \$6.50], and (c) 3 cases of beer for Tally Ho’s troops.)

The mission was to strike a suspected night work area 30 miles NW of Dong Ha. My backseater was a recent Air Academy grad, our take-off at 10:30 pm. Our callsign was my Covey 75, our fighters two F-4s with HE (bombs) and napalm, callsigns Coyote 4-1 and 4-2. On their third bomb run, Coyote 4-1 said “Oh shit – “ followed by a long streak of fire.... I rechecked our briefed altitude, but it was correct. A ride next morning in a Jolly Green rescue helo revealed a streak of burnt forest and nothing else; 4-1 had just pressed too hard....

A fast-forward 30+ years (and thanks to fellow-Red River Rat Mike “Loadhacker” Sloniker’s tutorial on how to “read our Wall”) I located the KIA names for October 13, 1966 – and found that only two were “Air Force.” A check with their then-Ops Officer confirmed the names; so now I have the IDs of Coyote 4-1’s lost crew!

7. **“FAC and the Green Beret.” (“Wabash Cannonball”): E):** By the end of 1966, I’d met Brenda for a 2-week leave in Hong Kong (in lieu of an R&R [Rest and Recuperation] in Bangkok, two new Majors had taken over my additional duties, and I was taking more photos and movies around Kontum (as I’d done at Dong Ha). Back home, Robin Moore’s Tales of the Green Berets was a best seller (and a comic strip was in play), so I wrote a song lampooning a snotty FAC (me) and an A-team radio operator (snide ... until VC attacked). Of course, everything that could go wrong — did! The FAC turned the fighters loose, most of the friendlies survived ... and I added that song to a tape of all the dirty songs I knew. My roommate, Lee Goettche (“Getchee”) sent copies to all ten A-teams in Kontum and Pleiku provinces (comprising the 24th Special Tactical Zone; 24 STZ).

In 1995, I was given a paperback, Mike Force, author LTC (Ret.) “Bucky” Burruss. One of the songs his men and their FACs would sing at their Nha Trang bar was credited to “Captain John Myer”). A few years later, I was able to put Bucky in touch with his “Walt” FACs. So – Bucky had given me my “15 minutes of fame” those decades ago; I never knew it then, nor have I ever met him in person since!

8. **“Glory Flying Regulations (III SEA-on).” (“Battle Hymn of the Republic”): G):** The late Oscar Brand’s “Glory Flying Regulations” contrasts WWII’s combat thrills to peacetime boredom, as per by his first verse:

Hap Arnold built a fighting team that sang a fighting song
About the Wild Blue Yonder & the days when men were strong.
But now we're regulated 'cause we don't
know right from wrong — The force ... is ...shot ... to hell!

My first change (II) was to advance to the Vietnam era, first by Services (Air Force, Navy, Army, and Marines) and then collectively, both ageing and “memorialized.”

My last change (III) forwarded 30 years to: insert the effects of Remotely Powered Aircraft (RPAs); use Calvin Coolidge’s plan to pay for our ever more costly new aircraft; and finally reveal that “... if a fighter pilot tells it ... it’s a g—d---m lie!”

9. **“‘Willie’ Wilbanks’ One-Man War (II).” (“Jesse James”): E):** Like several of my songs, “Willie” has gone through changes: the first to correct Dalat from “Province” to “Sector”; the second to add one verse and change another to coordinate Willie’s need to protect the Vietnamese Rangers against the (now)-attacking NVA, as Army gunships and Air Force fighters were still en route. When Willie had taken a hit and crashed: the ARVN Rangers and U.S. Advisers were pinned down by VNA fire; Warrant Officer (WO-1) Jerry Bourquin’s “slick” helo was driven off by enemy fire; WO-1 John Grow and partner’s “Huey” gunships made passes at the enemy; Lt Col Norm Mueller (Willie’s ALO) maneuvered his Bird Dog to shadow Willie’s crash sight from the sun so that a “Dustoff” rescue helo could pick Willie up ... but he died on the way to hospital at Bao Loc.

Eleven months to the day, Willie’s parents were presented with the Air Force’s second (and first posthumous) Medal of Honor of our Southeast Asia (SEA) War.

10. **“Your ‘Flying Special.’” (“The ‘Midnight Special’”): G):** They say that any flyer who develops solid expertise in an aircraft considers it as “special.” In my case, it was three tours in the F-101B/F “Voodoo” (10 years), and my one tour in the O-1E “Bird Dog” (10-months in Vietnam). Other flyers, of course, had their own favorites, especially for combat missions.

The first verse cites the Bird Dog’s use in all the SEA War operational areas, the second notes the bombs, napalm, cluster bomb units (CBUs) and guns available on most fighters. The third verse, the hazardous missions of helicopters, especially carrying troops to (hot) landing zones (LZs), picking them up again, and defending themselves with machine guns. The fourth deals with enemy ground fire ranging from small arms to antiaircraft artillery (AAA; i.e., larger-caliber guns to missiles), where

— whether you're flying from land bases or aircraft carriers — a lucky shot may “ruin your day.” Finally, “going ‘Downtown’” (borrowing Petula Clark’s hit song) became the slang for strikes into Route Pac’s 6A (Hanoi area) or 6B (Haiphong area), the most heavily defended targets where aircraft and flyers’ losses were concerned.