

**Action Report:** Memorial Day Writers' Project (MDWP)

**Activity:** A Tribute to our Nation's Veterans

**Date:** Nov 11, 2009

**Location:** Washington, DC

(Constitution Ave., Area 5, behind the sidewalk facing the WWII Memorial)

**Weather:** 43 to 47 degrees; rain and drizzle all day

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**It was a glorious, beautiful, miserable, cold, rainy day.** We had eleven presenter-participants, who took us to the Vietnam DMZ, Chu Chi, Chu Lai, Khe Sanh, Dong Ha, Nha Trang, DaNang, An Khe, China Beach, Qui Nhon, Binh Phouc, Saigon, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand.

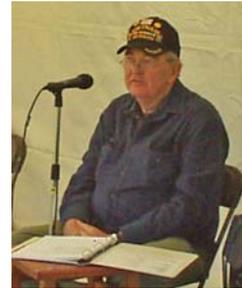


Forward Air Controller (FAC) **Jonathan Myer** started us off promptly at 11:30 hrs with a round of ballads about his fellow in-country and out-of-country (Vietnam, Thailand, Laos) FACs flying the O-1 Bird Dog as they directed tactical air support for US and ARVIN ground operations.

Jonathan served from April 1966 through February 1967, flying visual reconnaissance (VR), air strike control, and other support missions in II Corps' Central Highlands province of Kontum and in the DMZ. His Kontum flying provided intelligence for the Military Assistance Command Vietnam ("MAC-V"), plus direct support for Army of Viet Nam ("ARVIN") unit operations and the U.S. Special Forces ("Green Beret") A teams throughout the province. For his 3-1/2 weeks of DMZ flying, he was based at Dong Ha, in I ("Eye") Corps' northernmost province of Quang Tri, under Project "Tally Ho." His mission

involved around-the-clock surveillance, looking for signs of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infiltration across the DMZ, to be followed by air strikes. Jonathan's songs were primarily ballads and tales documenting his own and others' experiences; some were tragic, some were humorous and even surreal — three major characteristics of flying Bird Dogs in a combat zone. He sang 14 songs throughout the day and was accompanied by his 12-string guitar. (A listing of and brief description of the ballads Jonathan sang are provided at the end of this report).

**Dick Richards** (1<sup>st</sup> Cav) read from his novel "*Cologne No. 10 for Men*" (available on iUniverse.com, B&N.com, Amazon.com) and he sang several songs he wrote while stationed in Vietnam: *Bong Son Bridge*; *The Ballad of John Wesley*; *Diggin' a Hole*; *The Chaplain*; and *When's the Sun Gonna Shine on Camp Evans?* Dick's Skytroopers CD is available at ([www.cdbaby.com/cd/RichardMorris](http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/RichardMorris)), lyrics can be seen at [www.vietwarsongs.com](http://www.vietwarsongs.com)). Dick served as 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. rifle platoon leader in the 2nd Battalion, Fifth Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division during the second half of 1967, and 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Battalion Communications Officer (battalion songwriter and historian) for the 2/5 in the first half of 1968.



**Maritza Rivera Cohen** (a Vietnam era veteran) read from her hand-made chapbook of twelve poems entitled "A Mothers War." Maritza was inspired at the MDWP to conceive and develop her collection based on her son's experiences in Iraq as a Marine. The book of poems is approximately 9 x 14 inches in size, with a course-textured cover on olive drab paper. The chapbook is hand stitched and created on hand-made paper. Maritza began with a four part poem "Encounter" (in two voices), which she read with our host, Dick Epstein. Later in the day, she read "Semper Fi," which expressed the dread and reality of last letters; "Camouflage," portrayed the sights, sounds, and emotions of a deployment; and "They Gave Their Sons," titled after a quote by FDR inscribed on the WWII memorial. To conclude, Maritza joined forces with Mike Basdavonis, who accompanied her on harmonica for her reading of the title poem "A Mother's War," "No Why," and ended with a haiku entitled "Mother's Day." Her book honors those who served and those who wait. The entire collection can be read at [Milspeak.org](http://Milspeak.org). To purchase a copy, contact Maritza by email at [mariposa@jumpingfishmetalworks.com](mailto:mariposa@jumpingfishmetalworks.com)



**Kerry (Doc) Perdue** was with us once again (there is a lot less of him this time). Kerry was assigned as Recon, 2/47th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division in Bihn Phouc (about 60 miles south of Saigon). Kerry brought copies of his new book of poetry "*Poems in the Keys of Life: Reflections a Combat Medic*," and several other poems written this past year. Kerry kept close to Donut Dollies Holley Watts, Emily Strange, and their large, but friendly escort from CA. I didn't catch his name, but he was once with the Mobile Riverine Force and 9th Infantry Division.



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Kerry read the following poems:

*"I Got Me A Case of the C Ration Blues"* – a poem about the rosy picture painted by his caring, friendly recruiter in comparison to the reality of the situation; *"My Mommy's Running Naked in the Middle of the Street"* – a bizarre nightmare written in the voice of an Iraq veteran struggling with flashbacks and PTSD; *"The Gals Dressed In Powder Blue"* – a reminiscing look at those wonderful Red Cross workers called Donut Dollies and how we always see them as they were so long ago; *"Your Life Made A Difference To Me"* – a one way conversation, starting 40 years ago, to Jim—a soldier's soldier, who one day stop writing back – a another victim of PTSD; *"Band-Aid and Profile"* – an old photograph brought back memories of the "medic dogs" that asked for nothing and freely gave their friendship and love and reminded us of home; *"Where Am I?"* – a last conversation between a badly wounded soldier and his caring nurse; and *"The Letters"* – a hypothetical letter written by Kerry's mother to her grandson, recounting how every male member in their family served in the military during time of war and how proud she was of her grandson. In a return letter, Kerry's son commits to serving proudly as his family members did, and thinks of his elderly grandmother with love in all that he does. Thanks for sharing with us, Kerry. To visit Kerry's website, go to <http://www.kerrypardue247.com/index.html> (Rice Paddy Stew and Saigon Tea)



**Holley Watts** (Donut Dolly, '66-'67, 3rd Marine Amphibious Forces, Cu Chi, Da Nang, An Khe, and Phu Bai) protected by a poncho as she read from her book *"Who Knew?"* and told us of her attempts in tracking down and finally meeting with family members of one of the veterans she got to know during her tour in Vietnam.



**Emily Strange** told us a humorous, but scary story of adjusting to life in the warzone and the importants of being able to get to the bunkers quickly during rocket and mortar attacks. Emily served as a Donut Dolly based at Dong Tam with the 9th Infantry Division Mobile Riverine Force. Emily has a wonderful web site at <http://www.emilydd.com>.

**Clyde Christofferson** read excerpts from a *"Your Hero and Mine, Scott,"* a great read created from letters, written by his then 19-year old brother, Scott, who was ambushed near Chu Lai as part of Operation Wheeler, as he served with the 101<sup>st</sup> as combat reporter. Scott, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon, was ambushed by two NVA Companies (approx 200 enemy soldiers). The enemy was driven off, leaving 60 North Vietnamese dead at the cost of 17 members of the 101<sup>st</sup>. Scott refused to leave his position as he provided defensive cover fire enabling other members of his platoon to safely withdraw.

**Bernardo** (a recent veteran) is a spoken word artist in the Washington area and read several fast-paced, rhythmic lyrical poems about his observations of the wartime army, the political environment, and the state of our economy.



**Tanker.** We had the pleasure of welcoming back a fellow Vietnam veteran nicknamed "Tanker" with his 100-year-old guitar he carried from OK. Tanker made tentative friends with the MDWP microphone and was well received by the audience as he

reminisced about life as a tanker and military life in general. Tanker, it was good to have you with us again.

**Sistah Joy**, a local poet from the Washington area, read several uplifting and inspirational poems. I remember one in particular, a poem about the climb to become an Eagle Scout and the character it engendered. 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, MD. She also Hosts "Verse, Vibes, & Bites" a monthly poetry series that includes featured poets, music and an open mic at an area Barnes & Noble bookstore.



Chi Gong practitioner **Mike Basdavanos** stayed with us all day and provided background music for **Maritza Rivera Cohen**, as she read several of her poems and offered several rich and varied tunes of his own making on his talented harmonica. Adventurist Mike accompanied me for six visits to the Jessup Correctional Institution where he taught basic Chi Gong exercises and meditation techniques to a group of inmate-students. Mike is also an instructor in Martial Arts.

**Thanks to Holley Watts**, first on the scene, for helping me set up. **Thanks to Point Man Ministries** for being the good neighbors that they are. **Thanks to Emily's escort** (from Dong Tam with the 9th Infantry Division Mobile Riverine Force—I'm guessing here) who held me up by the scruff of the neck so I could raise the MDWP banner over the MDWP tent. **Thanks to Barbara Morris** who sat at the front table trying to keep the CD's and books out of the rain and for inviting those who hesitated in front of our tent to look at the photo album and glance at our bulletin board.

**Thanks to all of you who came to participate and to listen as we honored our veterans. Thanks to VVA 227 and those of you who helped with the donations that made this event possible. Thanks to all those who served and those who are serving today in heeding their country's call.** Don't forget our Website at [www.memorialdaywritersproject.com](http://www.memorialdaywritersproject.com)

Don't forget, **Clyde Wray** has a new book of poetry (139 pgs) with an Introduction written by Mike McDonell and the Forward written by Barbara Whitmarsh. You can contact Clyde at [www.clydeawray.com](http://www.clydeawray.com)

The following presents a list and brief description of the ballads sung by USAF FAC Jonathan Myer. Contact Jonathan to purchase a CD.

- "Teeny Weeny Bird Dog": My first song after I resumed song-writing in the mid-1990s (some 30 years after my Vietnam tour), it covers the typical events and challenges of flying the O-1E (formerly and still known as the L-19) -- essentially a WW-I aircraft in a post-WW-II conflict -- over the subtropical jungles of Southeast Asia, some 10,000 miles from home.
- "Saigon Warrior" (tune: "*Sweet Betsy from Pike*"): A traditional Vietnam War spoof on the "REMFs" (aka rear-echelon [um] maternal fornicators) who populated headquarters staffs and enjoyed the flesh pots of Saigon. Typically, their access to supplies and equipment allowed them to "dress the part," often at the expense of up-country troops at "the pointy

end of the spear.”

- “FAC Meets Saigon Warrior” (tune: “*Streets of Laredo*”): In May of 1966, when Kontum’s poor weather precluded any local flying for a spell, I took a trip back to Saigon. I bought my first camera, took care of paperwork at FAC Hq, invested in 20 cases of their beer (to break our “drought” back at Kontum) — and saw my first “Saigon Warrior.” This song is one of wishful thinking, from three decades later.
- “My Dai Uy Hat” (a narrative punctuated by verses to the tune of “*Mary Had a Little Lamb*”): Part of my FAC “uniform” was the floppy jungle hat given me by a Vietnamese counterpart. I “lost” it following my “med-evac” of an old Montagnard and his ailing baby grandson from the Dak Pek Special Forces camp to Doc Smith’s hospital for Montagnards, some clicks (kilometers) northeast of Kontum.
- “Orran O’Sporran, the Third” (tune: “*Abdul el-Bulbul Amir*”): Wars aren’t wars without people who use them for personal advantage. They range from incompetent to egotistical to tyrannical to fraudulent — those who seek medals they didn’t earn and, to the disgust of those who knew the facts, often got them. Such people may even mean well, but foul up just the same. It is all too rare that any are unmasked, but this song tells of one who was. His name is changed, but the events were true.
- “Tally Ho” (tune: “*Engine 143*”): “Tally Ho” was the name of the mission and the area over which it was flown: the so-called DMZ. Although FACs thought it was a suicide operation to fly Bird Dogs up there, no FACs were lost during my brief stay. Of course, some had close shaves and I took the only O-1 “hit” of my entire tour, but not everybody was so lucky. This is just part of their story.
- “Hunting Trucks by Starlight” (tune: “*Great Speckled Bird*”): We flew Tally Ho missions around the clock, looking for signs of enemy activity. At night, we used light-enhancing Starlite scopes to look for trucks heading south on open stretches of road. When we found one, we’d ask our airborne C-130 command post (“Hillsboro”) for flare-birds (“Blind Bat”) and fighters -- to strike before the truck disappeared under jungle canopy. The odds were mostly with the trucks, but not this time. This is the story of that mission, flown with “Salty” Harrison, in October of 1966.
- “Coyote Four-One”: This ballad recounts the loss of “Coyote 41,” leader of a flight of two F-4s under my control during an air strike in the DMZ, the night of October 13, 1966. The pilot simply misjudged his altitude during a weapons pass and literally plowed a furrow in the ground. “Oh, shit!” were his final words, followed by a long streak of flame. . . . More than 30 years later, I was able to locate the crew’s names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, “Our Wall.”
- “Different Missions” (a poem by Bill Rothas, sung to: “*My Pocketbook Was Empty*”): Bill was flying an EB-66 standoff-jamming aircraft while his Aviation Cadets classmate, Dick Allee, was shot down in his F-105 “Thunderchief.” This was his poem about that mission. Ironically, the two of them had had a drink together in their Thailand base’s Officers’ Club the night before Allee went down.
- “Mission to Mang Buk” (tune: “*Wreck of the Old 97*”): Another true story about how a grossly over-loaded Bird Dog still got airborne, climbed high enough to reach the Mang Buk Special Forces camp in northeast Kontum, landed on its slippery make-shift runway during a gusty rainstorm, offloaded the weaponry and mail my Army Ranger passenger had brought for the A-team – and made it home again.

- “Pink Elephant Polka”: Sometimes strange things happened when flying over the jungles of Southeast Asia — especially around the tri-border area of South Vietnam's Kontum Province, Cambodia, and Laos. This is one of them. Yes, the elephants were “pink.” Yes, I did fire a rocket at them — and missed. And maybe the “whump” I felt in return was from ground fire, not turbulence. . . . Years later, I confirmed that the enemy did use pachyderms as pack animals, and other FACs had also seen pink ones, presumably from reddish mud that had dried on their hides.
- “Warrior Bards” (tune: “*All Around the Water Tank*”): “Yodelin’ Irv” LeVine wrote the original version to pay tribute to several fellow-balladeers of the Southeast Asia War, who keep our generation’s combat memories alive. As he had focused on the Johnson-McNamara years, I added a couple more verses, both to add FAC singers and to take his song through to our war’s ignoble end.
- “‘Willie’ Wilbanks’ One-Man War” (tune: “*Jesse James*”): Of my two FAC school classmates killed in action (KIA), one was Hilliard A. “Willie” Wilbanks, near the end of his tour as Sector FAC in Dalat, southern II Corps. He saved *more than 100* Vietnamese and U.S. Army Rangers from annihilation in an enemy ambush, but at the cost of his own life. The Air Force awarded him its second (and first posthumous) Medal of Honor out of twelve awarded during the SEA War. The specifics are enough to curl anybody's hair, but Willie simply did what many of us would have tried to do in his place — *whatever was necessary to help ground troops in contact with the enemy*. This song is my attempt to assure that Willie and his sacrifice are remembered.
- “FAC and the Green Beret” (tune: “*Wabash Cannonball*”): One of the best parts of province FAC-ing was working with the Army’s Special Forces, or Green Berets. Their A-teams built camps all over South Vietnam to rally local people against the Vietcong (VC) and try to stop infiltration from the North. In January 1967, I wrote a spoof about our special relationship and how it [um] worked. The song explores what could have happened if a Green Beret team got into trouble, needed close air support, and everything that could go wrong — did. . . .

Till next time.