

Action Report

Subject: Memorial Day Writer's Project (MDWP)

Activity: Song, Poetry and Prose on the Mall

Date: Nov 10&11, 2003

Location: Washington, DC

(Behind the sidewalk facing 20th Street and Constitution Ave.)

Weather: Nippy, 48 degrees

Nov 10, Day 1

I don't know how it gets better, but it does. This year our tent was positioned closer to the sidewalk and attracted more people who were passing by. I also noted that although we competed with other activities on the Mall, the readings continued right through the ceremonies held at the Wall. I suspect it had a lot to do with the interesting presentations by presented by Bob Amom, Karen Zacharias Spears, Steve Page, Doc Kerry Pardue, Charlotte Kozak, Kenneth Lee, Randy Sena, Norma Jean Griffiths, Joe Finch, and Tom Edmonds.

The list of MDWP participants was even more diverse than prior years. We heard from Grunts, an ARVN advisor, a translator, intelligence officer, and political advisor for the rural pacification program. We heard from Donut Dollies who visited troops in the field, wounded grunts praying for extraction by Huey, Medics who treated the troops; a chopper pilot who performed extractions, nurses who triaged the wounded, operating room nurses, ward nurses and Donut Dollies who served as surrogate girlfriends, sisters, and mothers who were the last to hold the hand of our wounded veterans.

We heard from the daughter of a veteran, the wife of a veteran who didn't come back, and the wife of a veteran who recently went to Vietnam to find forgiveness. There were a lot of hugs and some tears. The frequent sirens, news helicopter and Park Police helicopter circling overhead made me think of Saigon and the commotion that often accompanied life in Cholon.

We captured much of the readings on tape, thanks to Cathy Solomonson and Brenda Myer, who took turns manning the VHS camera. After a brief Marine Corps invocation by Briah Conner, Dick Epstein read several of Clyde Wray's poems and a poem written by Rod Kane. Dick then read some of his own poetry which gave us a view of night life in Saigon, a birds-eye view of sapper attacks on the air strip in Can Tho, and several other poems that reflect the attitude and difficulties of the veteran trying to adjust to civilian life back in the world.

The audience listened attentively to first timer, **Gerald Ney**, (Aerial Surveillance Officer 68/69 and now VVA Pennsylvania State Council Chaplain, as he read a poem *entitled In Memory of Skip* and *Purple Leaves*. Gerald has a lot of material still in his head that will one day make it to paper as poems or perhaps short stories.

John "Soup" Campbell, (ASA, Radio Research) read from his book *They Were Ours*, which profiles the life of 43 veterans who didn't return to Gloucester County, New Jersey. John told us about the life and growing up of Guy Schaeffer (Guy's mother and sister were in the audience). Guy didn't make it back from the Ia Drang in 1966.

Our old friend **Jonathan Myer** (USAF I Corps, Forward Air Controller, O-1 Bird Dog, 66-67) warmed up his fingers and started off with one of my favorite tales from Vietnam, *The FAC and the Green Berets, then continued with Different Missions, and Last Flight*. Many of Jonathan's songs are available on CD.

Now for the woman's contingent. **Marilyn Knapp Litt** took command and presented a wonderful program. **Lynn Cantor, Bobby Keith, and Sarah Blum** provided assistance with introductions and holding the mic. I always struggle to find the words to convey what I feel inside; when the women do that, they make it sound easy. They are direct, articulate, clear, precise, powerful, soft and always truthful.

"Doc" Kerry Pardue (with attitude) 68/69 755 Medical Detachment, Pleiku; 8th Medical Detachment, Ban Me Thuout; Scouts, 2/47th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division, Bihn, Phouc, started things off with touching tribute to the nurses. Kerry serves on the Board of Directors of the Sharon Lane Foundation. He just starting writing about 2-years ago and he does a hell of a job. I think he found a new calling. He read a tribute to Sharon Lane, a tribute to all nurses in the voice of twelve different veterans, and a tribute to Emily the Donut Dolly, who encouraged him to start writing. This was Kerry's first time with us and we hope he makes it a habit.

First Sergeant Noonie Fortin read from her book, *Women At Risk: We Also Served*. Angels in Vietnam. Holly Watts (Donut Dolly, 67/68, 3rd Marine Amphibious Forces, Chu Che, with the assistance of Sue O'Neill and Marilyn Knapp Litt, presented an interactive show- n-tell using the theme *Who Knew*. I understand Holly is planning to present her material on CD.

Nancy "Q" Lolja served as an Army Nurse in the Delta and revealed her understanding of Veterans Day, life in the ER, and remembering PTSD (Penetrating the Shroud of Death)-- all contained in Jan Hornung's book entitled *Angels in Vietnam*.

Mary R. Powell (US Army Nurse, 24th Med Evac, 70-71) read excerpts from her book, *A World of Hurt, Between Innocence and Arrogance in Vietnam*. Mary reminded us of a touching story and explained the significance of a glass of orange juice, placed at the Wall.

Nancy Smoyer (Donut Dolly 67/68 Da Nang, An Khe, Cu Chi) works at the Vet Center in Fairbanks, Alaska. Nancy read several pieces she "found" on her computer and gave us a diary view of some of her experiences as a Donut Dolly and OJT. Emily Strange, (Donut Dolly 67/68, Dong Tam) read a poem for another Donut Dolly who couldn't be present (Penny Evans). The poem was dedicated to Linda Van Devanter who recently passed away. Emily also read a touching poem that took 34 years to write to a friend, Michael Stacy, a guitar-strumming, folk-singing Cobra pilot who didn't make it back; a poem entitled *Bombs on Baghdad*; and a dedication to Sharon Boyer, a Nam nurse who recently passed away.

Cheryl Mauldin from Mesa AZ, teary eyed from the cold, read a touching poem dedicated to her husband, whom she lost in Da Nang in 1968. **Susan O'Neill**, 12th Evac, 68/69, read from a journal that she made on a recent trip to Vietnam where she and her husband rode a bicycle from the DMZ to Saigon-- and included an interesting collision with a motorcycle

and the family riding on it. You might want to get a copy of her book containing short stories entitled *Don't Mean Nothing*.

Kammy McCleery (Donut Dolly 67/68) told us of her experiences while working in I, II and III Corps. Dusty Shuster, Surgical Nurse, with all of her charm, read from her prize-winning chapbook, *Battle Dressing* and a dedication to Linda Van Devanter who inspired all of the nurses and authored a book entitled *On Before Morning*.

The day ended by a command rendition of all women participants, who sang a song written by Emily and Barbara while in Dong Tam in 1969. The song is aptly entitled *Incoming*. The VCR battery died just before the finale. But Doc **Roy Branch** was there to video tape it with his VCR. Hopefully he'll send me a copy).

Nov 11, Day 2

On day 2, I'm pleased to report we had some more familiar faces: **Randy Sena** (active duty at Andrews AFB) read several poems that told us of National Guard and Reserves pitching in to walk the fence line and pulling guard duty, and the requirement to stay focused on the task at hand. **Kenneth Lee**, 3rd Battalion 9th Marines I Corps, with his powerful and clear voice read *Letter From a Soldier (a Civil War Vet)*. It sounded as if it were written yesterday. He then read another favorite of mine, *I Once Breathed the Fire of Dragon*. Randy and Ken are involved in the local poetry scene. **Cathy Solomonson** and **Dick Epstein** read with them last year at Borders in Bowie. Welcome back guys. Let's make this a yearly tradition. After the tripod-mounted speaker/amplifier was blown over and landed near Joe Finch, it was Randy's companion who took charge and improved our support system design.

Jonathan Myer-informative, captivating and entertaining as usual, played several songs depicting the bravery of the FAC in Vietnam. Jonathan sang about Medal of Honor recipient, FAC Willie Willbanks, who single-handedly saved a Battalion-size group of Army Rangers from certain annihilation by VC ambush. Willie took on the VC on from the air with his M 16; a WW I (British) drinking song still sung by combat pilots today; a tale of the Tally ho-July 1966 mission to find infiltrators in the DMZ using the O-1 Bird Dog and later F100's; a landing attempt in I Corps that was hampered by running into buffalo dung; and his story about the day when everything went wrong. As always, we thank Jonathan for being with us and sharing his memories and his humor.

Karen Spears Zacharias, who lost her father in Vietnam when she was 9, told us a slight difference of opinion she had with anti-war protesters in Portland, and of her recent trip to Vietnam to visit the spot where her father fought based on a photo he sent home. Karen's dad, SSG David P. Spears served with the 25th Infantry Division and died July 24, 1966 in the Ia Drang valley. The photo location was taken at the foot Dragon Mountain, near Pleiku. Karen is a freelance writer and journalist who will have a book coming out on the 30-year anniversary of the fall of Saigon entitled *Hero Mama*. You can find out more about Karen and her book at [http:// www.walldads.org/heromama.html](http://www.walldads.org/heromama.html)

Wayne Miller (Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, 68/69) stopped by in his wheel chair and read a poem *Forget About It*. Buckaroo Lad Carrington was with us both days and gave us a daily dose of history and read his popular *Yesterday's Heroes* and *A Name on the Wall*. Both of these poems are available in his book *Give Me the Wind*.

Old timer **Tom Edmonds** paced himself well and read several times throughout the day. Tom read *Night Watch* in the name of his wife, Mary Beth, who served as a Nurse for two tours in Vietnam. We were happy to see Norma Jean Griffiths again on the second day. Norma was the first person at the tent and spent the whole day with us. Norma read several of her poems that appear in *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*. It's quite a book! One of Norma's poems told of her method of saluting a one star (I made her read it twice that day). It's short but it says a lot. Several poems of Dana (Dusty) Shuster and Emily Strange also appear in the book.

"Doc" Kerry Pardue also returned on the second day and read several other poems including *The War at Home, Some Call Me Medic, Some Call me Doc, The Wall, Old Man in the Mountain*, and *A Time of War and a Time of Peace*. Thanks Doc.

Bob Amom (co-contributor to *Chicken Soup for the Veteran*) walked by and used us to pre-screen a presentation he was to make at the Woman's Memorial later that day. He did a great job and we reaped the benefits. Bob was an advisor to a Regional Popular Forces (Ruff Puff) Vietnamese rifle company that operated in the delta during 68/69. He told us about a return trip he made to a Delta village (unreachable by road) where he operated for 7 months. While showing off an old photo album he took with him, the son of his Vietnamese counterpart recognized the photo of his dad (Lt. Houng) who he worked with Bob more than 35 years ago. Several villagers (including two Viet Cong snipers) remembered him. The snipers said they tried several times to put him and his 5-man team out of action. It was a wonderful and touching story and several of the villagers recognized him and some of the photos of the villagers he took 35 years ago. He was able to walk away for the first time with a sense of inner peace realizing that he did the best he could.

Steve Page (1969/1970 20th Engineer Brigade, Xuan Loc) appeared from nowhere and read some great poetry. His first visit to the Wall was in 1982. Steve read some of that hard-hitting grunt material that takes us all back for a few brief minutes. I understand that Steve also has a play he recently wrote and maybe we can get him to come back to read with us again. He read poems such as *Black Granite Wall, Xin Loi Vietnam, I'm Going Home, Flashbacks, To the Colors, Huey, Huey*. Steve gave a voice to many who served in combat and support.

Charlotte Kozak chose to become a Donut Dolly instead of joining the Peace Corps. She served in Danang and read several pieces that told us of her introduction to war and her tenuous interactions with the men she visited in the hospital and fire bases.

Joe Finch, Med Evac Pilot, 25th Aviation Division, 1969, came from work in suit and black trench coat and told us about the art and skill required for effective midnight requisition, loss of a friend and read a poem from his book *Angels Wing*. Although a battle-hardened chopper pilot, Joe had to dive for cover during an incoming speaker/amplifier as he was

sharing an interesting and touching story with us. Joe has read with us before and we're glad he's back.

A Nurse (**Kathy Fennell???**) standing on the sidewalk relayed an experience she had on a recent trip to the Sharon Lane Medical Clinic in Vietnam. She was an OR Nurse at Chu Che during the war. After observing an operation, at the Clinic, she was introduced to Vietnamese nurse who worked in the tunnels under Chu Che for three years while she worked above those same tunnels. As they embraced, she knew it was a healing experience for both of them.

Dolf Droge (NSA Specialist, advisor to Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, and former local talk show host) visited us toward the end of the day and serenaded and educated us as he has in the past. Dolf touched on the "kind" help provided by Ted Kennedy to end the war -- by adding a budget amendment that denied the funding for further operations in-theater; the purpose behind the Watergate break-in, POWs not returned in WWs I and II, Korea and Vietnam; the benefits of nuoc mam; effective use of the overstocked hair spray in the PX in Vietnam; the problem caused by infiltration; and how to fight a war the Vietnamese way (the smart way); and the Saudi Arabia situation; and several other worthy causes involving the voting rights American MIAs.

Gretchen Sullivan, a local student, daughter of a Vietnam veteran and serious poetry buff, read several strong and honest poems about her relationship with her Dad in the struggle to adjust to life in the States. We're pleased to hear **Cathy Solomonson** (24th Evac Long Binh 68) read one of her fine poems.

A Marine Vet, who not long ago lived on the streets and guarded our tent at night, stopped by to read a poem and to let us know that he's working and doing OK.

A woman from Wisconsin (Renee ??) stopped by and read a poem she wrote for PFC Rachel Krista Heather Bosveld. Rachel died while serving in Iraq. We also had a young woman in the audience who was constantly fighting back tears. Her brother is now a Marine in Iraq. She appreciated the interest and caring she saw from all of the people at the Memorial Day Writers Project.

Jonathan Myer ended our program with his song *Answering the 9-11 Call*.

As a side note, I found out that if you want a hug from a passing woman, you simply have to stand next to a sad-looking Marine.

Did I forget anyone? You bet and for that I apologize. It was two days of remembrance, two days of compassion, accepting oneself and each other, frailties and all. Thank you all for sharing yourselves, for remembering and 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 on Memorial Day weekend or next Veterans Day.

Thanks Briah Conner for the muffing, Cathy Solomonson for the coffee and chi, and Noy Epstein for the fried Rice and fruit cocktail.