

Action Report: Memorial Day Writers' Project (MDWP)

Activity: A Tribute to our Veterans

Date: May 29, 2017

Location: Washington, DC

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

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



The Washington, DC metropolitan police closed Constitution Ave in preparation for the 80,000 expected motorcycles with Rolling Thunder. I had an interesting time meeting up with the tent setup team on Sunday morning. And to top it off, my phone decided not to work. I was being tested. I am thankful for the tent crew's tenacity. They found a way around the roadblocks and were setting up the tent when I got there.

For our Monday event, the weather was surprisingly nice. There was no rain. The temperature was around 78 degrees with a little breeze. **Barbara Morris, Pat and Dan Moore and Tom Glenn** manned the front display tables and sold books and CD's, and chatted with people as they stopped by. We had seventeen readers including two new authors (Marines) who are members of VVA Chapter 227 from Vienna VA.

Dick Epstein set up the sound system (which worked well but quit at 1500 hrs.) erected his photo board of photos taken throughout Vietnam and the MDWP easel donated by **Ed Henry** for all to see our mission statement and photo tribute to USMC **Briah Conner** and **Roy Correnti**.

Dave McKay and **Tom Mclean** (and their wives and families) surprised us this year—our 24th year on the National Mall. **Julia Torres** and two of her close friends were with us again. Julia was in better shape than ever. Last year she couldn't walk. This year, she stood and maneuvered herself. The following presents a brief description of the day's events under the MDWP tent.

Our host started us off with a prayer and followed with a poem written by



founding member **Clyde Wray** as a tribute to **USMC Captain Jonathan Briah Conner**, who passed away this year. MDWP participants and Brenda Myer, Ed Henry, Mike McDonnel, Cathy and Daryl Solomonson and Dick Epstein attended Briah's extended family at his internment ceremony at Arlington, VA. and we all gathered briefly at the Ft. Myer Officers Club.

Jonathan Myer was joined by fellow FAC **Dave MacKay**, up from Alabama on a family visit. A few years back, Jonathan, Dave and “Raven FAC **Jim**” **Roper** played a few sessions as The Three FACéros, “FAC” being the acronym for “Forward Air Controller,” with our missions depending on what aircraft we flew, where, and when during our respective tours in Southeast Asia.

Jonathan flew the O-1E “Bird Dog,” a single-engine tail-dragger that cruised at 80 mph (70 knots); most of his 1966 – 67 tour was as a Kontum Province FAC in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, with 3-1/2 weeks flying over the so-called Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between South and North Vietnam in the Fall of 1966. Dave flew the O-2A “Super Skymaster” (nicknamed “Oscar Deuce” or “Oscar Duck”), with two engines driving puller and pusher propellers that cruised at 115 mph (100 knots). Based at Pleiku (20 miles south of Kontum City) during his 1969 tour, Dave flew northwest (across Kontum Province) to cross the Vietnam border into Laos on the (then-secret) mission of interdicting North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (through Laos and Cambodia) before they could exit east, infiltrating South Vietnam along its western border.

Dave’s call sign was “Covey 536,” denoting an out-of-country mission while based in South Vietnam (Pleiku in II Corps for Dave), as was Jonathan’s “Covey 75” while temporarily based at Dong Ha (in I, or “Eye,” Corps) and flying northerly over the DMZ; otherwise, in Kontum (also II Corps) Jonathan was first “Baron 82,” then “Cagey 82,” denoting in-country basing and missions, primarily conducting daytime reconnaissance and air strikes.

Dave and Jonathan sang 18 songs, over three sets, many of them ballads about their tours in Southeast Asia, while set to traditional melodies. Many of the songs are listed below. A more detailed description is provided at the end of this report.

- *58,000 Names Carved in a Wall*. This hymn expresses the meaning of “Our Wall” to those who make the pilgrimage to mourn the loss of those named thereon.
- *The Bird Dog Cannonball*. Nineteen years later, the O-1E has achieved a mythic reputation.
- *Frankie and Johnnie (Air Force Style)*. Transposed to an Air Force setting, the characters follow the classic plot, ending in a military funeral
- *Dear Ma’am (Your Son Is Dead)*. A catchy tune where after a close call, Dave sat down and wrote a “What if” letter to his mom in the voice of his flight commander.
- *FAC and the Green Beret*. A mutual spoof on both communities: taped in Vietnam, sung by others, and 30 years later became the basis for a 20-year old repertoire.

- *How I Went IFR in Flying Buffalo Shit.* Based on an actual landing at the Dak Pek Special Force camp, water buffalo prove more dangerous than the Viet Cong.
- *My Last Flight.* A pilot's last flight.
- *I Fly the Line.* A Vietnam spinoff from Johnny Cash adapted to the job of a FAC.
- *The FAC.* A tribute to the 20th TASS FACs and describes a FAC's thoughts about the job.
- *My Peace Song.* (Set to Down by the Riverside). Jonathon's decree that VN vets should 'Study war no more.'
- *Warrior Bards: Our War.* *This ballad begins with Irv LeVine's homage to his fellow singers, and ends with the U.S.'s abandonment of the Republic of Viet Nam.*

Additional details of these and other wonderful tunes are provided at the end of this report.

Richard (Dick) Morris. 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." and he read excerpts from his award-winning novel "Cologne No. 10 for Men," which grew out of his songs and experiences in Vietnam. One reading was about counting bodies of dead enemy soldiers after a harrowing night ambush. Body counts were how we kept score in the war and were used to calculate kill ratios. Another was about soldiers in mangrove swamps in a cold monsoon rain discussing their last cigarette. In his "Spot of Green" reading, a soldier walking across a firebase comes upon a pile of plastic body bags, two deep, ten high and twenty or thirty long, "each stuffed with the refuse of battle and neatly tagged for shipment." It honors the fifty-eight thousand Americans who died in Vietnam — ten times as many as have perished in Iraq and Afghanistan and five thousand more than in Korea, but only half as many as in World War I, one-seventh as many as in World War II, and one-tenth as many as in the Civil War, our most horrible war. "When will we ever learn?" Dick sang the following songs interspersed with his readings.



"Lonesome for You," a love song from Richard to his wife, Barbara.

- *Diggin' A Hole*, about digging foxholes and sleeping holes, an activity soldiers performed daily all over Vietnam. This song received a finalist award in the *Vocal Jazz & The Bong Song Bridge*, a catchy tune about the easy time spent guarding the Bong Son Bridge (in Binh Dinh Province).
- *John Wesley*, a song about a 1st Cavalry Division point man who volunteered for point for an entire year and killed a dozen VC.
- *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.

- *When's The Sun Gonna Shine On Camp Evans?* monsoon season at the northern HQ of the 1st Cav.
- *The Chaplain* is his song about a fictitious chaplain who leaves the field with battle fatigue. He dedicated it to the soldiers who come home with PTSD.
- *I Got A Lonesome Me*, a silly song about all his body parts (except one) that were lonesome
- *Mirage*, a love song he wrote to his wife (of 43 years, now) while sitting on a sand dune overlooking the South China Sea
- *Go To Sleep*, a lullaby he wrote for his yet-to-be-conceived children. "Go To Sleep" is also on his daughter's CD, "Imagine That" (see www.rickandaudrey.com).

Tom Glenn. Tom read twice, including "In Flanders Fields," a poem by John McCrae, and from his novel *Last of the Annamese*, set during the fall of Saigon, which he survived.



Jim Smith. Jim read three poems on his experiences in Vietnam plus a poem by Yusef Komunyakaa, W. D. Ehrhart, and Bao-Long Chu.

Edith Sanabria. local artist, author and poet stopped by to read with us. We haven't seen her in quite a few years. Welcome back! Edith read two strong performance poems *With These Boots* and *The Dance of Violence*.

David Martin. David was all set to read with Maritza Rivera, but Maritza had a family emergency. Dave read several poems about the precarious relationship we have with our environment and to remind us that we are the only stewards of the earth for generations to come.

Bruce Curley. Bruce read several poems about terrorist attacks, the American spirit and two men from his home town who were killed when a hijacked airplane smashed into the Pentagon and several family poems.



Julia Torres. Julia served in Operation Desert Storm and as a civilian, worked for the State of New Jersey Dept of Justice. Julia read from her recent books *Still Standing*, revealing her wartime experience in Kuwait and Iraq and *Bolder and Braver*, a firsthand account of her undercover work in law enforcement.



Dick Epstein read several poems in between several readers. Dick read *Feeling No Pain*, about his first trip where he had to hitchhike to a communication site the delta and two poems inspired by tanker, Jim Stewart: *They Wanted to Give Me a Medal* and *Close Don't Count*. Aside from his own work, Dick read a poem by Clyde Wray (a tribute to Bria Connor) and a poem written by Rod (Doc) Kane.

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. P.S. Your donation is most welcomed to help pay for the rental of our tent on the Mall and the wonderful sound system we use.

Thank you to all of you who participated and to those who help sponsors MDWP activities on the Mall. Special thanks to **VVA 227** and **VVA 641** for their monetary support. Our best wishes to our brother USMC **Bria "Gunny" Conner** who is with us in spirit. 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.

[ADDITIONAL DETAILS OF Jonathan's tour of duty in Vietnam and songs sung during Memorial Day 2017:]

1. 58,000 Names Carved in a Wall. (Based on a poem by Native American woman, Johnnie Rainwater; became a song by Jamie O'Hara; number of names updated first by Irv LeVine and currently by Jonathan.) The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, "Our Wall," has become the U.S.A.'s most visited monument — by Veterans, family members, and tourists from everywhere. Three more names added this May total 58,318.
2. The Bird Dog Cannonball. (Tune: The Wabash Cannonball.) Jonathan's paean to his O-1 "FAC bird" combines its history (its origin was the Army L-19, and the Navy and Marines also flew their versions), its performance (um, limited), and its longevity (it flew throughout the Vietnam War) gave its pilots "bragging rights. Surviving Bird Dogs are mostly privately owned, many of them by members of the International Bird Dog Association (IBDA).
3. Frankie and Johnnie (Air Force Style). (Tune: Frankie and Johnnie.) Based on the original story: this Frankie is an officers' club hostess; Johnnie is a "squadron fighter jock"; the "fat bartender" rats him out; Frankie catches him "making love to Nelly Bly" — an original slander against the adventurous (and quite respectable) female reporter of 125+ years ago; Frankie's "forty-four" preempts the "UCMJ" (Uniform Code of Military Justice); and Johnnie is laid to rest with all the honors of a formal military funeral, culminating in "nickels on the grass."

4. Dear Ma'am (Your Son Is Dead). (Tune: (Dave's own.) After Dave was almost shot down by a 37mm anti-aircraft gun on his first solo FAC mission in Feb 1969, he thought about the kind of letter his squadron commander would have written to his parents if he had been killed that day and decided it would have been one that was long on platitudes and short on facts about what happened. So, he wrote Dear Ma'am to be just the opposite, a letter devoid of platitudes and long on facts about what happened, so his parents could come to closure. Fortunately, Dave survived 140 combat missions on the Ho Chi Mihn trail in the O-2A, OV-10 and F-100F and his squadron commander never had to write a letter to his parents. Dave's song is sung to this day by OV-10 FACs, but with (ahem) a more obscene ending.

5. FAC and the Green Beret. (Tune: The Wabash Cannonball.) Jonathan's spoof featuring a snotty FAC and a sly Green Beret radio operator swapping insults (some true) as first one then the other comes under fire and needs help. Despite the screw-ups, the "good guys" prevailed. Jonathan wrote the song in January 1967, before he left Vietnam — and only learned in 1995, per "Bucky" Burruss's Mike Force, that it had been sung by Bucky's A-Team and its FACs at the Nha Trang bar on Friday nights a couple of years after Jonathan had "DEROS'ed" (= returned to the U.S.).

6. How I Went IFR in Flying Buffalo Shit. (Tune: Strawberry Roan.) On July 30, 1966, Jonathan landed his Bird Dog at Dak Pek, a Special Forces A-team's camp in the northwest corner of Kontum Province and noted for its tricky runway. He tossed out a smoke grenade to test the wind and made a low pass to clear buffalo off the runway. However, their "residue" was picked up by his rolling tires, blown forward into his still-rotating propeller, and then back through his open windows to spatter the rear seat.... Moral: Don't mess with V-C buffalo!

7. My Last Flight. A pilot's "last flight" is also noted as he's "gone west." In Jonathan's case, he imagines leading a 3-ship takeoff in his F-101B "Voodoo" (the air defense interceptor version) to join comrades who have preceded him, whether in combat, peacetime accidents, or finally old age. If he can't find them in heaven, he'll surely find them in "the other place," where he can relive the "Flying and fellowship, missions and crew— / A thousand souvenirs for those who flew...."

8. I Fly the Line. (Tune: Johnny Cash's I Walk the Line.) Dave wrote these lyrics at Pleiku Air Base in 1969 as a general description of what a FAC does, especially the FACs who flew regular visual reconnaissance (VR) missions (i.e., surveillance flights within a province or out-country area to gather intelligence), and be ready to control air strikes (either preplanned or for "troops in contact," TICs). An Air Force pilot who flies missions day in and day out is known as a Line Pilot, so "flying the line" has a special meaning in the Air Force.

9. The FAC. This song started life as an unfinished poem by Capt. Grover Norwood from the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS) that became part of Professor Lydia Fish's Vietnam Veterans Oral History and Folklore Project at Buffalo State College. She gave the song to 20th TASS FACs Jim Roper and Dave MacKay who finished the poem and also set it to music. The song provides a good description of how FACs felt about flying a year of intense combat missions, often exceeding 500 hours of combat flying. Many a ground unit owed its lives to the readiness of FACs to control fighter strikes on their behalf.

10. My Peace Song. (Tune: Down by the Riverside.) Jonathan says: “We were driving south to Georgia in early 2001 to attend the inauguration of fellow-FAC Hilliard A. ‘Willie’ Wilbanks (KIA February 24, 1967) into Georgia’s Aviation Hall of Fame. We picked up a PBS radio station and caught Brownie McGee’s butter-smooth guitar and Sonny Terry’s chugging harmonica as they sang ‘Down by the Riverside.’ As our war had been over for some 34 years (at the time), surely we too could turn the other cheek to our former enemies? So, on return home, I put together a few (um) prerequisites for us Viet Vets to ‘Study war no more.’”

11. O-1E Song. Written by F-105 pilot Irv LeVine, this song clearly demonstrates the mutual respect between FACs and Fighter Pilots. Fighter pilots preferred flying the fast jets because they were more challenging and they considered FACs to be sitting ducks for anti-aircraft guns. But, when circumstances forced Fighter Pilots to become FACs, many found that they preferred the FAC mission. (Jonathan adds: “Irv first played this song at one of our Society of Old Bold Aviators [SOBA] annual Flyers’ Songfests 15+ years ago. He said he had me in mind as the FAC. I asked where he got ‘Twinkie’ for the FAC’s callsign. He said that ‘Twinkie’ was the name of his cat.”)

12. Old O-2 Pilot’s Tale. Irv LeVine wrote this song for an O-2 pilot who described what happened when both engines quit during a steep dive while shooting a smoke rocket to mark the position of a truck on the Ho Chi Minh Trail — and the maneuvers that O-2 jock had to take to get his engines going again ... much to the enjoyment of the fighters pilots. What is not mentioned in the song is the fact that if the FAC had been managing his fuel properly by cross-feeding, his engines probably would not have quit as they did. Sometimes in the heat of battle it's hard to remember to do everything. Tsk.

13. Montagnard Rice Wine. (Tune: Let the Circle Be Unbroken.) Just in time for 2017’s Memorial Day, Jonathan completed this cross-cultural ceremony shared by mostly the Green Berets and various Montagnard tribesmen (“Mountain People”) that formed their A-teams in the Central Highlands. At Kontum, where the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (“MAC-Vee”), (comprising mostly Army garrison and support units plus two USAF O-1E FAC units), occupied the larger compound, the Special Forces B-team had its own smaller compound across the barbed wire ... which is where our local “Yards” also visited. What we did at “party time” is in this song.

14. The Sycamore Tree. Dave wrote this song while he was a student pilot at Laredo Air Force Base, Texas, in the summer of 1968. He had just received his O-2A FAC assignment and was looking forward to spending a year flying FAC missions that he knew would be dangerous. The “Sycamore Tree” is a metaphor for the United States, and the “five men dead” comes from the casualty reports and body counts (“KIAs,” or totals “Killed in Action”) that were appearing every night on television news.

15. Teak Lead. (Tune: Red River Valley.) “Teak” was a notorious F-105 Thunderchief flight call sign for strike missions against some of the most heavily defended targets in North Vietnam. Teak Lead, as flight leader, would be the first to dive on the target and a disproportionate number did not make it home. Eventually, the “Teak” call sign was considered such a jinx that the Air Force retired it. During 1966 alone more that 100 F-105s were shot down and more that 300 during the entire

war. The “Thud” pilots who survived their 100 combat missions over North Vietnam stand among the most respected pilots in the Air Force.

16. Willie Wilbanks’ One-Man War. (Tune: Jesse James.) Capt. Hilliard Almond “Willie” Wilbanks was shot down while attacking a large North Vietnamese Army (NVA) force preparing to ambush a smaller force of Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (“ARViN”) Rangers and their U.S. Army Ranger advisors. Jonathan, a Bird Dog classmate, heard this news two days before his own tour’s end. Willie’s parents received his posthumous Medal of Honor (MOH) exactly 11 months after his death. From the 1990s on, Jonathan has been researching everything about that battle from its survivors. He wrote this song in 1997; in 2000, he gave copies to Willie’s family; its latest modification was in 2016. In the present day, everybody who even serves is labeled a “hero.” Willie was the real thing: “[I say] there was no FAC with an O-1 at his back / Who could do what Willie did on his last ride.”

17. Young Covey. (Tune: Tom Dooley; an old murder ballad, then Kingston Trio hit.) New words by Danang Covey FAC Skip Franklin become a song about low-flying FACs and what can happen — if they’re lucky . . . or not. FACs often flew low when working with ground forces, and the song typifies an “old head” (singing the chorus) while an FNG (um, “fairly new guy”?) projects his plan if things go wrong: “The Coveys are a rare breed / So quiet and serene / They go out in a ‘slow mover’ / Come back in a ‘Jolly Green.’” (Air Force’s HH-3E rescue helicopter; aka “Jolly Green Giant,” for its size and camouflage). But the OH has the last word: “They’ll blow [you] out of the sky. . . .”

18. Warrior Bards: Our War. (Tune: Waiting for a Train.) The basic “Warrior Bards” was written by “Yodelin’ Irv” LeVine, circa 2000, as a tribute to his fellow song-writing vets. Jonathan then added four FACs, who (in South Vietnam at least) “. . . told their fighters where / To make their bombs go boom!” As he learned more about the politics and growing opposition to the war, Jonathan added verses to cover most of the main events. For the U.S. (and allies), the war ended essentially with the return of our PoWs; for Southeast Asia, it went on. . . . North Vietnam conquered the South two years later (on its second try); Laos and Cambodia were racked by civil wars, and additional Asian dead topped 2 million.

Most of us Viet vets’ experiences were at the “retail” level: we are naturally invested in our own experiences, the good, the bad, those that stand out, the friends made, and (perhaps most afflicting) the fellows we lost. Few of us were in top-level positions, or have studied the war from a “wholesale” level: from start to finish and the crucial changes (enemy as well as friendly) along the way. Thus most of us are more influenced by movie heroics, media interpretations, claims by politicians, purported wisdom from non-participants or pacifists.

One book I’d recommend for anybody is Lewis Sorley’s *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* Harcourt, Inc., (1999).