

The best way to conclude Memorial Day: Sunset Ceremony at Alton National Cemetery

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
May 24 2017 8:15 AM



ALTON - After years of neglect, the Alton National Cemetery has been properly utilized for more than a decade to honor fallen veterans.

Vietnam veteran Richard Baird said he had portrayed Elijah P. Lovejoy in the upper portion of the cemetery for years without paying enough mind to the national cemetery

in the lower part - a sentiment he has since come to regret after reading national cemeteries in the U.S. are something of national shrines.

"That's how it all began - the process of cleaning it up," Baird said. "When I read that as a Vietnam veteran and as a sensitive person, I was exasperated the federal government would let such a shrine go the way it was going."

After the work of students from Marquette Catholic High School, Alton Middle School and Alton High School cleaned large portions of the cemetery, Baird said it looked more like the shrine it actually was. That work occurred nearly 14 years ago, but Baird has been utilizing the national cemetery for a sunset ceremony every Memorial Day since.

This year, like previous years, the 12th annual ceremony will be held at the cemetery's entrance. Baird, an educator at Alton Middle School, said each year he tries to invite more students to the event.

"I am happy to show students both the meaning of Memorial Day and the location of the cemetery," he said.

The sunset ceremony honors veterans who have fallen in the line of duty and features patriotic musical selections as well as a veteran speaker. This year, Baird will be delivering remarks for the second time in the 12 years he has been organizing the event. He said the original speaker could not attend, and he wanted whoever was speaking to have ample time to consider their words and dwell on the topic a bit before delivering an address at Memorial Day.

"A couple of years ago, a representative who had been to several Memorial Day cemeteries across the country - including in Washington, D.C., said Alton had one of the finest ones in the country," Baird said. "That was seconded by someone he was with."

That ceremony is open to the public just before sunset Monday evening. Baird said the Alton event is one of as many as 140 occurring across the country Monday.

"This is something beyond barbecues and seeing the president lay a wreath," Baird said. "It's all great, but when you live in the middle of the country, it's symbolism. This is an opportunity to attend a Memorial Day ceremony at a national cemetery."

Seating will be provided for as many as 100 people Monday evening. Baird said students deliver the chairs Friday, and they are locked in storage. He said he sets the chairs specially himself as a way of showing gratitude for those who have fallen in the line of duty both before and following his own service in Vietnam.