

Alton Memorial Day Sunset Service Again Touching Way To Conclude The Holiday

by Randy Manning
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ALTON - The 17th Annual Memorial Day Sunset Ceremony held at Alton's National Cemetery came off with the usual strong remembrance of those who fought and died for their country. This was the first time for a complete in-person ceremony in three years.

The Alton National Cemetery is maintained by the federal government, specifically the National Cemetery Administration. Local authorities work out of the Jefferson Barracks facility and Shrine in St. Louis. Richard Baird is the founder of the Sunset Ceremony and is still the leader of the tribute.

Alton's program Monday night featured a guest speaker, a welcoming by Mayor David Goins, music and vocals by a high school student, the Pledge of Allegiance led by an elementary student, a haunting version of "Echo Taps" played by three talented trumpeters, and the Alton Fire Department Pipes and Drums. {bagpipes and drums} This program has received compliments identifying it as one of the finest in the United States at a National Cemetery or Shrine

Jim Winslade, a six-year Air Force vet, spent two years at Scott Air Force Base and three years in Alaska. He said he received wastewater treatment plant service training and he still works in that area today.

He said Mr. Baird and his dedication to the nighttime Memorial Day service appears almost a one-man show and he is thankful for his dedication to the event every year.

"The young speaker really impressed me and the other thing that impressed me was the presentation of Taps," he said. "It has become a very emotional thing and my dad didn't plan on having a big military ceremony when he died, but when came time for the ritual ceremony team with the VFW showed up and wanted to do it for him and we said sure. I was doing fine that day until they played Taps. Taps create very strong emotions in me. It was just beautiful today. It is something we should cherish it is forgotten way too much. I really appreciate the quietness of this site it and the meaning of this ceremony. I hope people today remember all the people who died in their defense. Memorial Day is more than a barbecue."



Richard Baird, a Vietnam veteran, acknowledged that this was the 17th annual Memorial Day Sunset Ceremony and it is truly something he loves.

"This became a National Cemetery in 1940," he said. "About 19 years ago, my wife and I drove by and saw overgrown trees, and tombstones that weren't lined up perfectly and looked at the National Cemetery Administration website to see what could be done. Here we are 17 years later with \$500,000 of improvements and it is beautiful here.

"Today we had talented musicians and vocalists, we heard an elementary student speak, we heard Echo Taps with a trumpet, unlike anything I have ever heard before and bagpipes and drums. It seems every year I am asked what Memorial Day means to me and my response has been as a Vietnam veteran and someone who lost friends and relatives including my brother-in-law, it is a spiritual and emotional moment for me. Every year is a three-day weekend, barbecue, let's have fun and party, and that is all good, but on Memorial Day weekend I chose this time of day to end the weekend with an exclamation point on it."

