

ROBERT ALLEN FIELD

Memorial to a hometown boy

The Tribute page to Robert Allen, from The New Jersey Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Web Site reads, in part: ***“There is a Little League Field on 76th Street, West of JFK Boulevard in North Bergen (New Jersey) named in his honor”***

Robert Samuel Allen was killed in action on May 5th, 1968, during the Battle of An Bao in Binh Dinh Province, located in the coastal Central Highlands region of the former Republic of South Vietnam. The area is, in today's world, an idyllic landscape of rice paddies and small peasant villages. One of our unit's Platoon Leaders, Harry Wilson, recently brought back photos to bear this out, but in 1968 these paddy fields were dry as a bone and the scene of some of our Battalion's most horrific fighting. It was in the middle of this carnage that Bob Allen made that supreme sacrifice, machine gun blazing, to try to save his wounded and bloodied fellow soldiers. He died in his efforts, but those same struggles negated some of the intensity of enemy fires being leveled on a pocket of troops surrounded by North Vietnamese Army soldiers. To those who witnessed his bravery, including our own former Medic, Jim Fitzgerald, there is little doubt that his actions saved many lives that fateful day.

History aside, I was curious to see this Little League Field. My work with the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry KIA files, specifically with attempting to build a database of contact persons for each of our fallen men, has made me aware of several locations named in honor of our brothers lost long ago. Since my personal life's work takes me in the general vicinity of North Bergen, New Jersey, on many days, I packed my camera and, as expected, had a chance to stop at the field this past week.

I should mention that I was “spurred on” by a post I found recently on one of the many Vietnam memorial posting sites. Ron Belven, now of Branchburg, NJ, wrote: ***“I grew up in your hometown of North Bergen. I was a young boy when you died. They named our Little League Field in your honor, and I was the first to play on it....”***

North Bergen, New Jersey is not quite suburbs, not quite city. It is located in Northern New Jersey, West of the Hudson River, across from Manhattan and the 5 Burroughs of New York City. It rests on the western slope of a ridge that borders that well known river. To the immediate west of this ridge is another river valley prominent to Northern New Jersey, the Hackensack River Basin, formerly rife with landfill stench but now a pristine wetlands area.

So while there is the strong influence of urban living...houses packed one upon the next with only small backyards...if any at all, there remains a “feel” for the suburbs, as the view is often unobstructed out over these reestablished wetlands. It almost puts one in mind of many a San Francisco landscape.

At first I wondered where this field might be! There seemed to be no gaps in the overcrowded blocks leading up to the address I knew to be that of this Little League Baseball Field. As I turned the corner from JFK Boulevard, North Bergen’s “Main Drag” I first noticed only a School with a parking lot and small basketball court in the rear.



Then I noticed that the School Parking lot also provided parking for the Baseball Field located across the street. I parked and walked over to the field. You could not really get much of a view as this field was built into the sloping hillside terrain and surrounded by a tall 8 foot fence...padlocked! I could see a sign through the gate: "Robert Allen – Tony Avillo Field" but could get little more than a hint of the actual playing surface.

I briefly toyed with the idea of scaling the fence, but decided this would not sit well with my employer should the local police “take exception” at my trespassing!

I walked down the block, simply finding myself descending below the level of the field as I did so, and the view vanished as I proceeded. Then I realized I could get a better photograph seeking some higher ground and looking down. There it was! Just back across the street and above the parking lot was a basketball court on ground that was raised and actually higher than the baseball field. I sought out a suitable location there and got my final shot as the sun began to set in the distance. It was quite a field! Equipped with Lights for night baseball games!

As a young boy, I played Little League Baseball and can think of no greater thrill than to have such a fine playing surface for those childhood games!

Lon Belvin's tribute website post to Bob Allen continued: ***"I can still see the people crying at the ceremony honoring you. I was young and did not understand..."***

As I gazed over this scene, the green grass of the field coupled with the beautiful sunset to the West, I took a moment to remember a soldier and the home town he left to fight a war long ago. I can only imagine the wonder of this then young little leaguer at all the grief contradicting such a beautiful gift to the youth of this community. Years later he returned to the memory, much as I now seek to chronicle these same memories for posterity. Belvin wanted to thank the man, not so much for the great Little League Field of his youth, but for making the ultimate sacrifice for his country long ago.

"I want to extend my sympathy to your family and try to relay, in some small way, the respect I have for you! Rest in peace Soldier and thank you from my family for doing the job you did".

Lon Belvin, lbelvin36@yahoo.com, February 19, 2008

ROBERT ALLEN FIELD, NORTH BERGEN, NEW JERSEY



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