

Johnny Ro Veterans Memorial Park to be dedicated Saturday

By [ANNA BURGESS](#) |

PUBLISHED: September 11, 2015 at 12:00 a.m. | UPDATED: July 11, 2019 at 12:00 a.m.

Read more: <https://www.sentinelandenterprise.com/2015/09/11/johnny-ro-veterans-memorial-park-to-be-dedicated-saturday/>

LEOMINSTER — After six years of work by a father to honor his son, the Johnny Ro Veterans Memorial Park will be officially dedicated on Saturday morning.

Army Pvt. 1st Class Jonathan Roberge was 22 years old when he was killed while serving in Iraq in 2009. After his death, his father John Roberge resolved to create something to remember not only his son, but the many other local men and women who gave their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the six years since, Roberge and a small park committee have worked hard to create the Johnny Ro Veterans Memorial Park, which includes an army tank, a statue of Jonathan, battlefield crosses to signify the other soldiers killed with Jonathan, and a memorial with the names and faces of all 125 Massachusetts soldiers who were killed in action.

On Saturday at 1 p.m., Roberge and his wife Pauline, son Andrew and daughters Megan and Sarah, along with local residents and Gold Star families, will gather for the dedication of the memorial park. Roberge's brother, a lieutenant colonel who is flying home from Germany for the occasion, will speak at the dedication, as will his niece, who works for a veteran organization in Washington, D.C. Roberge will speak last, before the unveiling of a life-size statue of Jonathan.

"It's been six years since I've been working on the park," he said, "and the whole time I was building it, the only thing I was asking myself is if I was doing a good enough job, because those soldiers put their lives on the line."

According to Park President Diane Beaudoin, the original goal was to dedicate the park in June, for Jonathan's birthday.

"But the park wasn't done in June," she said, "so we chose Sept. 12, kind of going along with the Sept. 11 remembrance."

Beaudoin said, when they designed and built the park, the committee wanted it to feel personal. Many of the details in the park are references to Jonathan Roberge or to the way soldiers memorialize each other.

For instance, Beaudoin said, the M60A3 Army tank has the phrase 'I'm kind of a big deal' written on it, because Jonathan used to joke that he was "a big deal" for his job of driving generals, majors, and others of higher military rank than himself.

There is also a large rock at one end of the park marked with a bronze plaque, because his fellow soldiers in Iraq made a similar plaque there in Jonathan's memory. Many aspects of the Johnny Ro Memorial Park are like this, Roberge said.

"Soldiers would mail me photos of things with my son's name on them, like a wall, or a plaque," he said. "We just took all the things soldiers had done for other soldiers, and we duplicated them and put them back in the park. You can feel the military there, and feel the sorrows."

Perhaps the most moving part of the memorial park, Beaudoin and Roberge agreed, is the set of two concrete walls facing each other: one with the handwritten names of the Massachusetts soldiers killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the other with their photos.

The wall with writing is modeled after large blast walls at army camps in Iraq, on which soldiers write the names of their fallen companions.

"This is an exact replica of the blast walls that are in Iraq," Beaudoin said. "That meant a lot to John and Pauline and their kids, that his name is going to stay there as long as the walls are there."

The wall with photos, she said, is a sobering reminder that the names opposite are more than just words.

"When you look at the picture, it's a human being, someone's son, brother, sister," she said. "All of a sudden, it's not just a name, it's a person. This person belonged to somebody."

Building the park was a lot of work, Beaudoin said, both logistically and physically. Getting an army tank took two years of work on the part of Leominster Veteran Agent Rick Roteur, and raising money to fund the various memorials took several years of work as well. Actually installing plantings, memorial walls, plaques, and the statue was also time-consuming, Beaudoin said, with their small committee and some help from a state Department of Corrections work crew.

Despite the assistance he received from these other people, the project belonged to Roberge, said Beaudoin.

“The park was built with the sweat and tears and blood of John Roberge, for his son,” she said.

For his part, Roberge said the park is about no one besides the soldiers who are memorialized there.

If his son could see the Johnny Ro park, Roberge said his response would be “mixed.”

“His thing would be, ‘I did this, but I’m not looking for any recognition,’” said Roberge. “But on the other hand, he’d be happy that we’re involving all the soldiers from Massachusetts.”

The dedication on Sept. 12, he added, will focus on them.

“It’s not about the volunteers; it’s not about the people who gave their money to the park,” he said. “It’s an important day to recognize all these men and women who have given their lives to protect us.”

Read more: <https://www.sentinelenterprise.com/2015/09/11/johnny-ro-veterans-memorial-park-to-be-dedicated-saturday/>