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Fort Bragg Field, the “once in a lifetime ballpark,” named BaseballParks.com’s Ballpark of the Year

Over the 17 years that BaseballParks.com has presented its Ballpark of the Year Award, the winners have always been new stadiums meant to be utilized for decades.

Not this year.

The **2016 BaseballParks.com Ballpark of the Year is Fort Bragg Field**, the facility built by Major League Baseball to host one game. But, oh, what a special game it was!

The honor is given annually to the new or remodeled pro baseball stadium with the best combination of site selection, exterior appearance, architectural design, and fan amenities. This year’s winner had two additional advantages: nothing like it had been attempted before; the facility was built to show appreciation to America’s military.

During the 2015 season, the folks at MLB headquarters in New York came up with an idea to hold a regular-season game at a place where there’s no big-league baseball currently. When that concept was combined with the suggestion that the sport show its appreciation to our service men and women, the momentum to carry it out became unstoppable.

Major League Baseball partnered with the MLB Players Association and proposed the idea to the leadership at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, which is the largest military base (by population) in the world. Over 54,000 active-duty service members are assigned there – about 10% of the entire U.S. Army. The sales pitch from MLB included a bonus: once the game had been played and the temporary ballpark dismantled, the playing field would be left in place so that the soldiers and their families could enjoy it for years to come.

After approval was obtained from the appropriate chain of command (including the Acting Secretary of the Army and even Congress), work began to construct the one-time-use ballpark. On July 3rd, before 12,582 service men, women and their families, Fort Bragg Field hosted a 5-2 win by the Marlins over the Braves. Not only was it the first Major League Baseball contest ever played in North Carolina, it was the first regular-season game held on an active military base by any pro sport.

And MLB didn’t even ask the soldiers to pay for their tickets.

The announcement of the award was made in the pages of the August 10th edition of *USA Today Sports Weekly*. Joe Mock, founder and webmaster of BaseballParks.com and a frequent contributor to *USA Today* publications, penned the article that announced that Fort Bragg Field is the winner of this year’s honor. It’s the 17th straight year that BaseballParks.com has presented such an award.

“I fully realize it’s an unconventional choice presenting this award to a park that technically no longer exists,” Mock explained. “In my reviews of new baseball stadiums, I’ve always maintained that I like approaches that are different than at other parks. Well, you can’t get much more ‘different’ than a ballpark that is used only once, then dismantled. Truly, this was a once-in-a-lifetime ballpark.”

"It's a tremendous honor for the Fort Bragg Field to be named Ballpark of the Year," said Lt. General Stephen Townsend, Commanding General, XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg. "Helping to build the Fort Bragg Field and hosting the first-ever Major League regular season game played on an active military installation was hard work but also a lot of fun that paid off for our service members and their families. It really was a superb team effort for our nation's Independence Day made possible by some incredible American institutions, the U.S. Army, Major League Baseball, the Players Association and the Fort Bragg community. This is another example of what makes America and America's Army so special."

During press briefings prior to the game on July 3rd, Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred noted that the game at Fort Bragg was "Tony Petitti's baby." Petitti, the Chief Operating Officer of MLB, is justifiably proud of how the ballpark and game turned out. Regarding the award, he said "Major League Baseball appreciates this recognition. The process of building Fort Bragg Field was a significant challenge and ultimately a huge thrill. We could not have been more pleased with its aesthetics, functionality and the way that it honored Fort Bragg's great history. We are grateful to the Braves, the Marlins, the MLB Players Association, Populous, BaAM Productions, Murray Cook's team at BrightView and the leadership at Fort Bragg for allowing us to create a ballpark and an event that we will never forget."

Cook, who was responsible for creating a Major League-caliber playing surface from the land of an abandoned golf course at the military base, was an early proponent of bringing big-league baseball to Fort Bragg. "I've had the privilege of building and managing field projects around the world for MLB in more than 60 countries," he observed. "By far, Fort Bragg sits at the top of our list. It was an honor for our team at BrightView to construct the field for our service members and their families."

This year's award marks the 10th time a ballpark designed by Populous has won, but that doesn't make it old hat to the designers there. "A true once-in-a-lifetime ballpark for the military at Fort Bragg, it showcases the evolving potential of pop-up sports venues," said Todd Barnes, a Principal at Populous and the project manager for this facility. "We're honored to have been a part of this project, and being named Ballpark of the Year truly establishes Fort Bragg Field as one of the most memorable ballparks in Major League Baseball."

There were two other finalists for this year's award, both of which (of course) are being used for a whole season's worth of games. Spirit Communications Park is the gorgeous home of the Columbia Fireflies in South Carolina's capital city. Jimmy John's Field, full of imaginative architectural innovations, is in Utica, Michigan. It hosts all three teams in the start-up United Shore Professional Baseball League.

Last year's winner of the award was Monongalia County Ballpark in Granville, West Virginia. Past winners include AT&T Park (San Francisco Giants, 2000), Huntington Park (Columbus Clippers, 2009), Salt River Fields (spring training home of the Diamondbacks and Rockies, 2011) and Southwest University Park (El Paso Chihuahuas, 2014).

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Mock's in-depth review of Fort Bragg Field entitled "Truly, the Once in a Lifetime Ballpark" can be found here: <http://www.baseballparks.com/indepth/fort-bragg-field/>

For more information on this award or on BaseballParks.com, contact Joe Mock at 512-826-0853.

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