Popular Lansdale Catholic basketball star was drafted, KIA in Vietnam

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A memorial plaque on the wall of the gymnasium at Lansdale Catholic High School in memory of Armand J. Aufiere. Friday, June 14, 2013. Photo by Geoff Patton

Many who graduated from Lansdale Catholic High School in 1964 knew who Armand James Aufiere was.

The Lansdale Borough resident stood 6 feet 3 inches tall, and played the center position on the school’s boys basketball team, which captured the Suburban Catholic League title that year. According to LC’s 1963-64 yearbook, the team’s success ignited a wave of school spirit.

“Our gym was full of cheers and screams, and it was really great,” said classmate and Richland Township resident Carol Frick Keiser. “I always thought he was cute,” she said of Aufiere.

Aufiere’s teammate, John Cunningham, knew him since grade school. “Armand was not a person of many words. I always remember him as someone ready to smile and never did he speak unkindly about anyone,” he wrote in an email.

Armand and Chuck Lamelza were our co-MVPs. Armand was a good scorer (and) rebounder, but most of all an exceptional defender. His defense allowed us to play aggressively, and when someone got past any of us, Armand was there to block the path to the goal. Again, Armand never asked for much, but he gave his all. Additionally, I played football with Armand and had the opportunity to throw a few passes his way, but not with the same success we had in basketball.”
Basketball teammate Clyde Smith said that besides being “a real kind, gentle man” that was “an integral part of that team,” Aufiere was left-handed, which gave him an advantage even as far back as CYO ball.

“I know he had an offer (to play basketball) from Seton Hall (University),” said Lamelza, an All-Suburban League forward on the basketball team that also played football with Aufiere. He said that they stopped playing football after 10th grade because of the physical toll the sport took.

The team’s coach was Jim Lynam, who later went on to coach college basketball — including at St. Joseph’s University — and in the NBA — including five seasons with the Philadelphia 76ers.

“IT was my very first stint at trying to be a coach. I remember the whole group,” said Lynam of the LC hoops team, which was stripped of its championship after two schools complained that the team broke league rules by playing in a summer league in Narberth. The controversy, according to Lynam, concerned his presence at those summer games. But he insists that he was there as a spectator, and not as their coach.

Lynam described Aufiere as a high level rebounder. “He played with a quiet confidence and he had a certain dignity about him. You couldn’t get him ruffled. You told him to do something, and it was done, period. He really was a quality, outstanding fellow.”

“Over the years, I’ve probably remembered Armand … as much as any player I’ve ever coached,” said Lynam, who lives in Delaware County.

Drafted into military service, Private First Class Armand Aufiere served in the U.S. Army’s 4th Infantry Division.

“He wasn’t happy (about being drafted),” Lamelza said. “We kept in constant contact with each other. Armand came back on leave one time when he was 19.”

Aufiere’s tour of duty began Sept. 22, 1966, and and he was killed in Binh Duong, South Vietnam by an enemy grenade on Jan. 27, 1967. He was 22 years old.

Lamelza recalled that there was an open-casket viewing at Simcox-McIlvaine Funeral Home in Lansdale. With sadness in his voice, he said there was no hiding the damage the grenade had done to his friend’s face.

“It was quite surreal to all of us when we learned of his passing. Quite frankly the entire war was surreal. Most of our classmates and our friends were all at his funeral and Mass,” said classmate Catherine Callahan Cordero, who is married to a Vietnam veteran.

“It was all such a sad time for so many of us. His grave is in the St. Stanislaus Cemetery near my parents, and each year as I stop at their grave, I see his too. A sad reminder of a war that was such a waste of so many wonderful men and women.”

Classmate Andrea Kostik also knows where Aufiere’s grave is. “I pray for Armand at every Mass I attend. He is buried right in front of my parents at St. Stanislaus Cemetery. He died way too soon. I have seen the traveling wall (Vietnam Memorial Moving Wall), and I visited the actual wall in Washington. You can be sure I looked for Armand’s name. I know he is with God.”

Kostik went on to share a deeply personal story via email. “The most vivid memory I have is Armand being kind to me when others weren’t,” she said.

“As seniors at the end of the year, we received little cards with our name on to swap with our classmates. I wasn’t one of the popular kids, so very few wanted my card or offered me theirs. Armand went out of his way to approach me and said: ‘Andrea, may I please have one of your cards? And here, please take mine.’ I was so touched by that kind act. I never forgot him.”
Anthony Sandone, a basketball teammate and close friend of Aufiere’s, remembered a moment when they were together in church preparing for Confession. According to Sandone, Aufiere was on leave after being in Vietnam for a month. The soldier told his friend, “Ant, I’m coming home.”

His death made Sandone so distraught that he had to be restrained when “Taps” was played the day of the funeral.

“What I can remember about Armand was that he worked so hard to achieve any goal he set his mind to,” said classmate Bob Tereshinski. “I remember hour upon hour that he would shoot baskets in the St. Stanislaus parking lot. Always had time to welcome you and asked if you wanted to play.”

“I was very taken back after I heard of the loss of this great hero and fellow classmate. All of us owe this man our prayer every Sunday for his ultimate sacrifice to be able to live in a free and great country. Armand would not have it any other way to sacrifice himself for the good of all around him.”

Jim Keller, another of Aufiere’s classmates, is a Vietnam veteran. “I was saddened when I heard of Armand’s passing. Armand left me a lasting memory of a very kind person. What a wonderful smile! He was a classmate that everyone liked,” he said.

Mary Ann Travers Reed said she knew Aufiere since sixth grade. “Out of a graduating class of 143 students, it was unsettling, to say the least, to lose one member to death on a battlefield. Armand’s death brought home to me the reality of this war that has left such a scar on our generation,” she said via email. “I can still see him standing at the free throw line, intently sizing up his shot, while obviously saying a quick and silent prayer for success.”

“My most persistent memory of that sad event was the viewing held the night before his burial. I cannot forget the look on his mother’s face, and how helpless I felt — how useless and meaningless were any words I could think of to say to her,” Reed wrote. “I simply squeezed her hand and said: ‘I went to school with Armand.’”

Later on, classmate Carolyn Skutta Gilmartin encountered Aufiere’s mother, Louise, at a beauty salon. She remembered telling her: “He served our country, and what a gentleman.”

“She had tears in her eyes,” said Gilmartin, who now lives near Sarasota, Fla.

“Go with God, Armand, and rest in peace,” said Reed.

On the Wall: Panel 14E - Line 84