Georgia Forest Named for VFW Member

A Vietnam War vet with a penchant for wildlife preservation received the honor of having six acres of green space bear his name

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Tom Reilly spent his childhood playing and roaming the splendorous fields and forests in western DeKalb County, Georgia. The towns of Chamblee, Dunwoody and what is now Brookhaven were filled with wild life. Reilly's love of this area northeast of Atlanta led to a life of forestry preservation. It seems appropriate that a greenspace along Brookhaven's Remington Road was named in honor of Reilly, a VFW member with Post 10822 in Dunwoody.

The Tom Reilly Green Space was dedicated in September 2021 in appreciation of Reilly's years of service preserving the natural environment in the community. The 6-acre space is a fully grown southern oak hickory pine forest.

"I grew up in the woods here," Reilly said. "I have lived in the same 3-mile area since I was 8 years old. The country's largest urban forest is here in Atlanta — 36.5 million trees can't be wrong."

Years after running through the Georgia forests as a boy, Reilly found himself in similar terrain, but in the vastly different world of Vietnam.

TWICE WOUNDED IN VIETNAM

Reilly graduated with a business degree from Oglethorpe University in Atlanta in 1967. As the sole-surviving son, he could have exempted himself from the draft, but chose not to.

"My family has a long history of serving in the military," Reilly said. "My father and uncles all served in World War II."

In September 1967, Reilly was drafted and headed to Ft. Benning, Georgia, for basic

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE
200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719
info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

training. In 1968, Reilly was sent to Vietnam's IV Corps with C Co., 3rd Bn., 7th Inf. Regt., 199th Light Infantry Brigade. He was wounded twice during his tour.

The first time was in December 1968, when Reilly's unit was in pursuit of a squad of Viet Cong. They approached a creek with a single log bridge.

"We made it across the bridge, and a 'Bouncing Betty' came calling," Reilly recalled. "It popped up out of the ground and exploded — 16 of us were taken out in one shot."

Reilly took shrapnel in the back, close to the spine. He recalled smelling smoke and seeing flames.

"The jungle was on fire," he said. "We started filling helmets with water to put out the fire to keep it away from the wounded."

He spent a month at the hospital in Cam Ranh Bay. After returning to his unit, the company commander told Reilly he could apply to be an Army war correspondent. For the next six months, that was Reilly's job.

In April 1969, he was out covering the action when the unit ran into a few booby traps. Once again, he was "pummeled with shrapnel." Since he was wounded twice in action, he was allowed to stay at the base for his last month in country.

"I arrived home on July 20, 1969, just in time to see men walking on the moon," Reilly said.

In addition to his two Purple Hearts, Reilly was awarded a Bronze Star for meritorious service. Years later, Reilly received a second Bronze Star, which he tucked away.

After the March 30, 1981, assassination attempt on then-President Ronald Reagan, Reilly sent that second Bronze Star to the White House.

"I was so impressed with Reagan's courage after that, I wanted to do this," Reilly said. "I never heard a word about it for 31 years."

In 2013, Reilly was inducted into the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation Heroes Gallery as a result of that gesture more than three decades earlier.

'VOICE OF THE ENVIRONMENT'

When Reilly finished his military service, he was ready for another type of serving.

"I believe that service to your country should be followed by service to your community," he said. "If you would like to thank people for their service, do two things: vote and volunteer."

For many years, Reilly volunteered as the habitat coordinator for the National Wildlife

Federation in the Dunwoody-Brookhaven-Chamblee areas. With 55 species of wild birds and small animals, Reilly provided the areas with food, water and a place for birds and animals to raise their young. He also planted trees and wrote wildlife articles and sought other volunteers.

Reilly also was one of the founders of Brookhaven, which became the 11th city in DeKalb County in 2013.

As a member of the Brookhaven Tree Conservancy, Reilly works to preserve the metro Atlanta Tree Canopy.

“The city’s tree protection ordinance requires builders to pre-select the trees they are going to keep,” Reilly said. “There are 250 types of trees in Atlanta alone. We are doing what we can to protect those.”

Reilly said he was surprised when he showed up for the Brookhaven City Council meeting last year, only to find out about the green space recognition.

“The city said I have been the voice of the environment for so long,” Reilly said. “I have put a whole lifetime into serving my community. I’ve been happy to do it.”

In addition to his conservancy and preservation work, Reilly served as his VFW Post adjutant for six years, was a Boy Scout leader and has taught Sunday School for 35 years.

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