

Thomas Ryan Park Dedication

New park honors those who served

Tom Ryan was one of 68 students in the class of 1968 and was the city's first casualty of Vietnam War

By Troy Koester
Staff Writer

Prior Lake wore a face like that of a Norman Rockwell painting in the 1950s and 60s. It was a time when trust was not in question. Faces were familiar. People knew each other's post office box numbers and wouldn't hesitate to ask a neighborhood kid to grab their mail. Kids gathered in the field that is now Memorial Park to play pickup baseball games. The café owner paid the kids to shoot birds so he could feed his huge tom cat, and girls were still a few years away from playing high school sports. It was only a short distance to the outskirts of town where hunting and fishing were favorite activities of the town's youth.

It was the final stretch before modern technology and its conveniences became commonplace — from television to space travel in a decade and a half.

"You got a different aspect of things than you did in Bloomington and Minneapolis," said Pat McFadden, a Prior Lake resident who grew up during that era, when Prior Lake's population was a few hundred.

By the end of the 1960s things started changing. Duty called and many of the kids who rode bikes around town with baseball mitts on their handlebars wound up with weapons on their backs. Many followed in the footsteps of their fathers.

■ Thomas Ryan Memorial Park is scheduled to open in the spring of 2002.

Tom Ryan graduated from Prior Lake Senior High School in 1968. He worked with his father, Bill, at the feed mill in downtown Prior Lake. In August 1969, Tom Ryan joined the ranks knowing he was destined to a place called Vietnam. He was enlisting with some friends to make Army life easier. His mother reacted naturally.

"I didn't care for it," said Germaine Ryan. "It was pretty bad at that time. They'd be alright," they said, "nothing would happen."

Bill Ryan had been in the south Pacific with the United States Army at the time of the Japanese surrender in World War II. "They thought they'd enlist, get a couple of years in and get out," said Bill Ryan of his son's four of duty. With a draft all but inevitable, employers were hesitating to hire young men full time for fear that they'd be called to duty a short time later.

Phone call

Tom Ryan was born on the fifth day of the fifth month of 1950, Bill recites. He lived his entire life in Prior Lake. He and McFadden were neighbors until McFadden moved a couple blocks away, but they remained



Tom Ryan was a member of the 118th Aviation Company of the 12th Aviation Group, 1st Aviation Brigade in the United States Army. Ryan was killed in South Vietnam on March 17, 1970. (Submitted photo)

inseparable during their years at St. Michael's School and Prior Lake Senior High School.

"If you saw Tom, you saw me," McFadden said.

McFadden joined the Army before Ryan, and visited with his lifelong friend in Long Bien shortly before returning to the United States. Ryan told his buddy he hoped to call home on March 17, St. Patrick's Day.

McFadden was with Bill and Germaine Ryan that day, awaiting the call. It never came.

Two uniformed officers arrived at the Ryan's door on March 18. Tom Ryan had been killed in action on Tuesday, March 17, 1970, St. Patrick's Day. He would've been 20 on May 5. He was the first from the

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community killed in Vietnam. Others would follow.

"He did his duty," said McFadden. "His dad did his duty."

When Steve Schmidt was growing up, he passed by Ryan's house on the way to school each morning. He was part of many neighborhood ballgames, fishing and hunting exhibitions. "It was a shock when this came about," Schmidt said. "We were a close knit class." There were 68 in the

Class of '68. Ryan was the first casualty.

Ask McFadden to reflect on Tom Ryan's life and their experiences, and he'll explain, "It's hard to do justice in just a few minutes. I'd like to write a book."

Prior Lake was a small town. Tom Ryan's face was familiar to everyone. "To people in this town, he meant so much to everybody," McFadden said.

McFadden started a campaign

in the past year to honor Ryan. An attempt to have a street named in his honor was difficult. He was told that too many people would have to change their addresses. Last fall, McFadden's efforts to bring closure to Ryan's death took a big step. Working closely with Mayor Wes Mader, the Prior Lake City Council was convinced to pass a resolution naming the new city park on Mushtown Road "Thomas Ryan

Memorial Park."

"The council felt it was very appropriate to recognize (Tom Ryan)," said Mayor Wes Mader. "The thought was to use the park not only to remember Tom Ryan, but to everyone from the community that served our country."

"I was the last one to see him alive," McFadden said. "It's something I had to do. It made my life miserable until this thing got done."



Bill Ryan, Ss Zacchaeus Ryan and Germaine Ryan



