

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Brotherly love: The story of a brother trying to find his lost hero

Editors note: This is the third of three Now & Then in Ripon articles written by Ripon College students interning last semester with the Ripon Historical Society.

By Clara Carlson

A story of brotherly love hits home as part of a heroic, but high-risk journey to find out the truth about a loved one — the connection to a widely-protested war in a small town in central Wisconsin.

A family with roots in Ripon and Brandon demonstrates the power of love and the drive it gives humans.

Ronald H. Reilly (1937-1970), commonly known as “Ron,” was born in Brandon on Sept. 27, 1937. Ron also lived in Ripon for a short period of time. He enlisted and served more than a decade in the U.S. military, stationed in Germany, the Philippines and Vietnam, rising to the rank of sergeant.

But Ron’s connection to Ripon is much stronger than his short stay.

His younger brother, Thomas, known as “Tom,” graduated from Ripon High School in 1969 after being bounced around during his earlier years.

Tom also resided in Ripon in an apartment under Ron’s name — an arrangement that had begun when he was still a minor due to his parents’ death and the boys wanting to live on their own. This apartment was where Tom’s heroic, but not-well-thought-out journey began.

In 2003, Tom wrote the book “Next of Kin” (Potomac Books),



SGT. RONALD REILLY stands in his military uniform. He died in 1970 while fighting in the Vietnam War. submitted photo

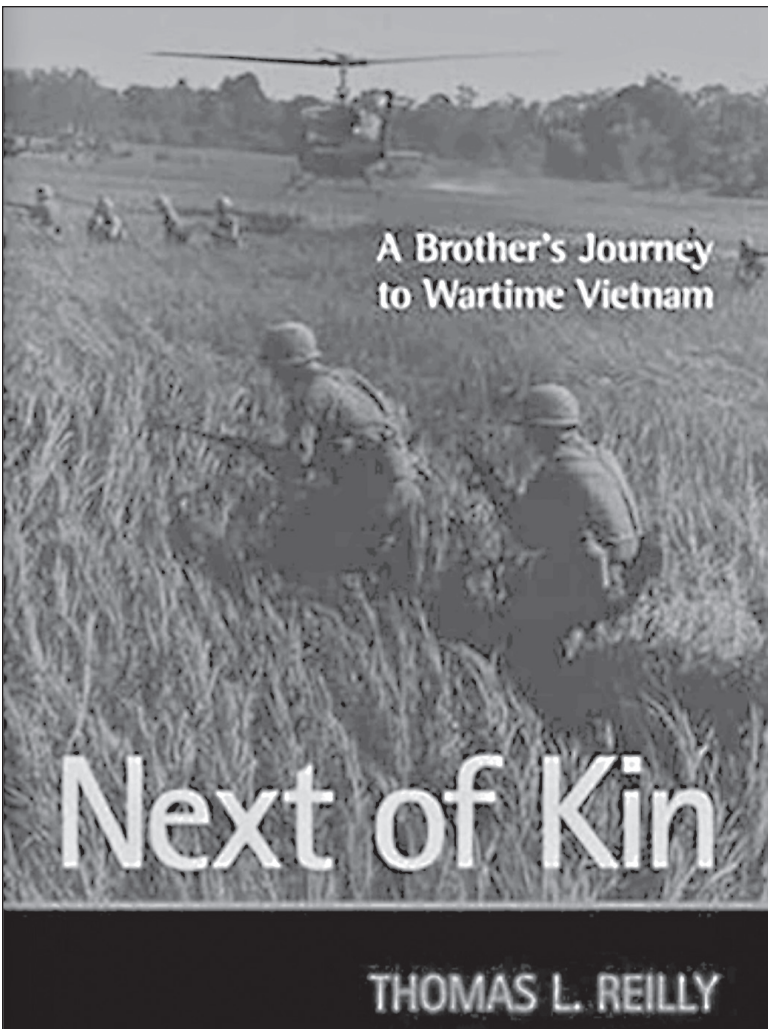
which captures his youth and journey across multiple nations to unearth what happened to his older brother and hero after the U.S. Army gave little explanation about his cause of death in Vietnam.

As the book states, “throughout the phases of my life Ron was always there for me.” During part of this journey, Tom explained their time evading police in Bangkok, Thailand, and how he was smuggled across the

enemy-controlled Ho Chi Minh Trail in South Vietnam, fended for himself in the large city of Saigon and survived a mortar attack and a run-in with malaria.

Tom went through all this just to find out the truth about his brother, his hero’s death. The war was still raging; it was a bold move for an American teenager to travel throughout Asia into war-torn Vietnam.

This story, including the uniform worn by Ron and the book



THIS IS THE cover of Thomas L. Reilly’s book, “Next of Kin,” which was published in 2003. submitted photo

that his brother Tom authored relating to his search, will be exhibited at the Ripon Historical Society through spring 2025 as part of “The Stories We Wear” exhibit. The exhibit features clothing that evokes memories and moments in time and serves as an retrospective in a series commemorating the historical society’s 125th-anniversary, hav-

ing been chartered and founded in 1899.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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