

RICHARD SIMPSON BOLT, JR. 1930 -1979

Why we remember – and honor the
35th anniversary of his death

In Remembrance

Richard Simpson Bolt, Jr., age 48, a Biological Technician on Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge from July 12, 1974 until February 28, 1979 was mortally burned while attempting to plow out a wildfire in the "Pocket" of Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge on February 15, 1979. Richard was burned over 70% of his body and survived for 13 days while being treated at the Brooke Army Medical Center in Fort Sam Houston, Texas before succumbing to his injuries.



RICHARD S. BOLT, JR.
1930 - 1979

Richard began his U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service career on June 1, 1964 as a temporary bulldozer operator on Santee National Wildlife Refuge in South Carolina. He became a career employee while stationed at Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge, Alabama. Subsequently, Richard served in a highly commendable manner on Key Deer and Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in Florida before coming to Okefenokee.

Richard was a truly dedicated refuge employee. He gave his all and ultimately, his life, to the profession of which he was so very proud. Richard will always be remembered as an example in his private and professional life. He will be missed by all that knew him, and those that never knew this man will be less than they might have been.

Richard's radio number, while he was stationed at Okefenokee, was "Unit 3". From this time on, "Unit 3 is hereby retired as a memorial to a splendid human being.

John R. Eadie
Refuge Manager
March 14, 1979

Richard Bolt was accomplished by any measures, among his accomplishments:

US Army veteran.

One of the first classes to attend and graduate from the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia.

Husband, and father of 4 children. 3 of the children survive.

Conditions Prior to the Pocket Fire

Weather conditions for 1978 were generally considered to be a moderate to severe drought by refuge staff. Annual rainfall for 1978 was 13.84 inches below normal, with only 3.34 inches of rain occurring from September through December, 1978.

9.08 inches of rain were recorded in January and February, 1979.

A low of 17 degrees had been recorded on January 15, 1979. Numerous hard freezes had occurred that winter.

Staff on site February 14 and 15, 1979 recalled that surface level winds were light, but that “tree top” level winds were strong and gusty, and would occasionally gust so strongly that they could hear the wind blowing.

The Pocket Fire

Richard Bolt, Okefenokee co-worker Doug Nuss, and the refuge burning crew had been burning February 14, 1979 (the day before the incident) in the “Pocket” area on the western side of the refuge. The prescribed fire had backed and flanked around several wet areas, leaving an irregular line by nightfall. It is important to understand that prescribed fire was very different in those days, and that it was not unusual for blocks not to be entirely fired out.

The burn was checked in the morning, February 15, and was found to be still burning slowly along this irregular line. The decision was made that no new additional firing would be added.

Shortly after 2:00 pm, a violent and unpredicted westerly wind caused the fire to head along a narrow line and enter an area which had been burned a month before. The fire then reburned through the gallberry understory, picking up in intensity, and jumping Highway 177.

At 2:20 pm, the fire was reported to Bolt and Nuss by a refuge visitor.

At 2:30 pm, Bolt arrived at the scene, and observed that the fire was spreading slowly with flame heights of 3 to 5 feet.

Bolt, considering the fire's slow rate of spread, picked a permanent firebreak about 150 yards from the north flanking line, and began plowing a line toward the swamp, about 200 yards away. About this time, Nuss, with his tractor plow unit, arrived and began to follow Bolt's line, widening and reinforcing it. Bolt reached the swamp, used as a firebreak, turned around and began heading back, also widening his plowed line.

At approximately 2:40 pm, Bolt had reached a point about 75 yards from the swamp, and Nuss reached a point about 75 yards from the road. At this time, another unexpected violent gust of wind caused the fire to run directly toward the men.

The fire crossed 150 yards of unburned pine plantation in seconds.

Flame lengths were estimated between 40 and 60 feet.

Nuss abandoned his tractor, running to the road for safety.

Bolt, being much farther from the road, tried to seek shelter under the tractor plow unit.

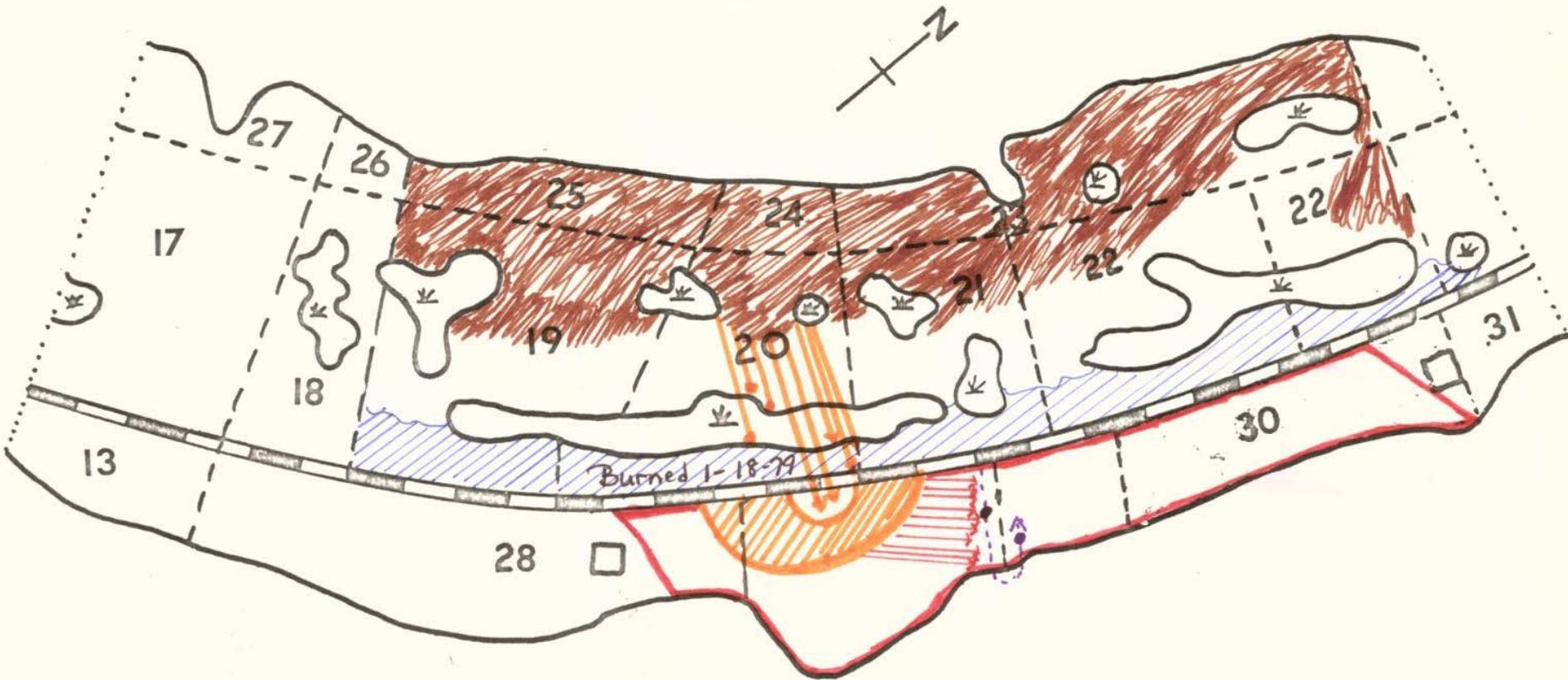
The fire advanced so quickly that his tractor plow unit was burned over, leaving it unharmed. The fire intensity was such that his portable radio had melted.

There were no fire shelters, or fire resistant clothing used by the Service at that time.

The fire continued to make a three-quarter mile to the north, lasting approximately 15 minutes, then laid down as quickly as it had risen.

Nuss immediately reentered the area to look for Bolt. He found Richard walking out.

Richard Bolt had suffered first, second, and third degree burns over 70% of his body.



Map of Pocket Fire, black dot is location of Nuss's tractor plow unit. The purple dot is the location of Bolt's tractor plow unit.

Richard Bolt was taken by ambulance to the Veteran's Administration Hospital in Lake City, Florida, and then transferred to the Brooke Army Medical Center in Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where he died on February 28, 1979.

Richard was posthumously presented with the Department of Interior's Valor Award and Letter of Commendation on November 13, 1979 in Washington, DC.

Doug Nuss sustained minor injuries on the fire. Doug was also presented with the Department of Interior's Valor Award and a Letter of Commendation. He is now retired from the Service and living nearby.



Left to right, Richard Bolt and Doug Nuss



Doug Nuss with Interior Valor Award and Commendation Letter

Richard Bolt Memorial Forest Marker, located in the Pocket



IN MEMORY OF
RICHARD S. BOLT, JR.
GAVE HIS LIFE FOR
OKEFENOKEE REFUGE WHEN
HE DIED ON FEBRUARY 28, 1979
FROM BURNS HE RECEIVED IN A
FEBRUARY 15, 1979 WILDFIRE

Richard is also memorialized in Boise, Idaho, at the Fallen Firefighters Memorial located at the National Interagency Fire Center.













OUR HEARTS
ARE FOREVER TOUCHED
BY YOUR SACRIFICE.

RICHARD S. BOLT

OKEFENOKEE NOV 1979

WITH US,
YOUR SPIRIT LIVES

In 1980, Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge constructed a new Visitor Center.

The new building was dedicated to the memory of Richard S. Bolt, Jr.

We will never forget.....