

Exchanging one uniform for another



**Philip
Dine**

As a reporter, I interviewed my share of politicians—some glib and rehearsed, almost all guarded and mindful of their image.

Fortunately, for most of my years in the craft I covered two riveting beats—labor and the military, beats seemingly disparate but in fact similar. Both involve ordinary folks serving the national interest; self-effacing people focused on their mission and on the collective effort required.

It's just dumb luck, I suppose, that at the NALC I get to work with the best labor has to offer—a great union composed of public employees serving their communities and the nation, and one that just happens to be replete with tens of thousands of mili-

tary veterans. This manifests itself in intriguing ways.

Just as I'm writing this column, I get a call that AMVETS (American Veterans) has selected a letter carrier as its national AMVET of the Year: Sam Riti of Yonkers, NY. Riti, who served in the Army in the late 1960s, carried mail for 39 years. A former shop steward and trustee for Branch 387, he twice saved lives while delivering mail and helped police solve burglaries on his route. A longtime high school basketball referee, he's done games for the USPS to raise money for the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC), MDA and civil rights groups.

A couple of weeks ago, I got a call from a former shop steward with San Antonio's Branch 421; a carrier he'd worked with had just been selected to receive the Medal of Honor for heroism in Vietnam. Santiago Erevia, an Army veteran, is one of 24 veterans nationwide (only three are still living) selected to receive the Medal of Honor from the president at a March 18 White House ceremony. This followed an official review of possible racial or religious bias denying the award to some.

And a few days ago, a Las Vegas letter carrier informed me that the March *American Legion Magazine* contained a positive story about letter carriers who are military veterans—and accurately depicting USPS finances.

The six-page article, "USPS at a Crossroads," begins by highlighting Juan Feliciano of Branch 36, a Puerto Rican native who served with the Army in Vietnam and then made his way to NYC, where he began delivering mail in 1982. It explores why the many vets who've found a home in the USPS workforce are such a good fit. Then it examines pre-funding's role in causing the red ink, discusses the improving finances, and quotes President Rolando as saying, "If allowed to innovate and grow, the Postal Service is poised for a fantastic comeback."

The financial reporting floored me, until I looked at the byline and recognized the freelance writer who'd called NALC Communications last fall for assistance contacting military veterans who could be affected by reductions at USPS. We helped, but also urged him to look into the actual financial situation—so readers would realize that cutbacks aren't necessary, or wise.

To his credit, he did so—for a publication sent to the American Legion's 2.4 million members (wartime veterans), including numerous lawmakers.

The Las Vegas carrier who called was Luke Koeller of Branch 2502, a 21-year Navy veteran. Most of his station's male letter carriers are veterans, he says, as are several female carriers. Amazingly, five carriers in the station (including Koeller) served at various times on the same Navy ship, the *USS Carl Vinson*.

The presence of so many veterans in our ranks helps our cause immeasurably. For one, it changes the tone of a conversation about postal issues. A reporter may push back on finances, but mention that one-quarter of letter carriers are military vets and the discussion changes instantly. It also provides grist for compelling features about individuals or like the one in the *American Legion Magazine*.

More broadly, it focuses attention on the public service all letter carriers perform—whatever your background—as you carry out duties based in the Constitution, caring for communities in ways that make you America's most-trusted federal employees. When vets carry mail, they've merely exchanged one uniform for another and they continue their public service. It reinforces what the Postal Service and letter carriers—each carrier—are all about.

Our letter carriers are humble. But we're in a battle to save the national treasure that is the Postal Service. Whether or not you're a veteran, you have carriers in your branch wearing their second uniform for the country. Tell your story, tell their story; relate it to the seamless service involved in protecting the homeland and its neighborhoods. And if you want to discuss how to do this, please call me. Engaging on this issue is one of the pleasures of this job.

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