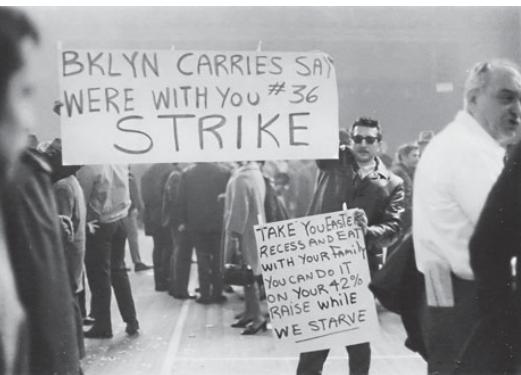


# Vet remembers filling in for '70 strikers



New York Branch 36 letter carriers went on strike to advocate for fair wages in 1970.

**T**he Great Postal Strike of 1970 began with only a few thousand letter carriers and lasted just a few days—but it would become a watershed event with an historic effect on the postal system, on NALC and on other postal unions.

When letter carriers in New York City Branch 36 voted to strike in March of that year, President Richard Nixon's administration talked tough but quietly tried to negotiate a solution. Frustrated by a lack of progress and by piles of undelivered mail as the days dragged on, Nixon took the drastic action of sending members of the military to replace the striking workers.

The conditions that led letter carriers in Branch 36 to strike had been simmering for decades. Letter carrier morale was low as Congress failed to raise letter carrier pay to adequate levels, and sometimes even reduced it.



The strikers watched as members of the military were called in to try to deliver the mail.

Postal workers had no collective-bargaining rights, and strikes by government workers were illegal. Letter carriers could only beg for, not negotiate, better wages and benefits—hence the informal term “collective begging.”

As a result, an average of one in every four letter carriers left their jobs each year, and some who stayed were impoverished enough to qualify for welfare benefits.

The frustration peaked on March 17, a week after a congressional committee voted for a small pay raise for letter

carriers that the strikers viewed as insufficient. Led by rank-and-file letter carrier Vince Sombrotto, Branch 36 members voted 1,555 to 1,055 to strike. Sombrotto had no official position in the branch, but would soon rise to become president of the branch and, later, of NALC. At midnight, picket lines went up at post offices through Manhattan and the Bronx.

Undelivered mail, including millions of paychecks, pension checks, bank transfers and other vital items, quickly piled up.

In a televised address on March 23, President Nixon declared a state of national emergency and ordered 25,000 troops into New York City to take over mail delivery. The military action, dubbed “Operation Graphic Hand,” involved personnel from the Army, Navy, Air Force, National Guard, Air National Guard, Army Reserve and Marine Corps Reserve.

On March 24, about 400 sailors, 300 airmen and 100 Army troops arrived at the general post office on Eighth Avenue and 33rd Street. With only a few hours of training, they were expected to take over the daunting task of collecting, sorting and delivering millions of mail pieces daily, plus the mail that had already backed up.

Army Spec. Tom Stokinger was one of the men sent to New York from Fort Dix, NJ, where he was stationed following a tour of duty in Vietnam.

“I didn’t know a strike was contemplated by anyone,” Stokinger recalled. “All of a sudden, we were told to get ready, we’re going on a bus to the post office.”

With little training and no experience in postal operations, Stokinger, now 70 but then just 22, and the other military personnel tried in vain to keep the post office functioning.

“We were told no helmets and no guns,” Stokinger said. Their mission was only to move mail, and the com-

mander of the operation feared that helmets and guns would disturb civilians. Still, the members of the military stood out in their uniforms as they transferred mail to substations, delivered bulk mail to businesses and sorted mail.

Most, including Stokinger, quickly realized the difficulty of matching a typical postal employee's pace of sorting 40 to 60 letters per minute. The soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and National Guardsmen were stymied by the cases before they could even attempt to go out on mail routes.

As incoming mail piled up, it became clear that the situation was hopeless.

"It was a joke," Stokinger said. "They had baskets of mail, chock full, and a wall of slots where we placed the mail. It was an unbelievably slow process of finding an address in New York City. Everyone immediately understood that it was an impossible task."

Arriving at the post office on the second day of the operation, Stokinger recalled seeing striking postal workers on a picket line from his seat on the Army bus. Knowing that the military's task of taking over the mail was a futile one, he yelled out the bus window to the striking workers, "Don't worry; we're not really helping anything!"

In all, military personnel were sent to 17 New York City-area post offices. The strike began to spread to other cities, including Cleveland, OH; Pittsburgh, PA; and Chicago, involving thousands more letter carriers and other postal workers.

It was becoming clear that the military couldn't replace trained, experienced postal employees—and that those employees deserved better pay and benefits.

By the end of the day on March 25, the Post Office Department had reached a preliminary deal with the striking workers. They put down their picket signs and went back to work the next morning. A few weeks later, a final agreement emerged that included pay raises. Congress acted quickly to pass legislation that reorganized the Post Office into a self-sustaining U.S. Postal Service—and granted postal employees a voice by giving them collective-bargaining rights.

Stokinger later left the Army and went back to his old job at a Gillette razor factory. He spent the rest of his career at the public works department in his hometown of Quincy, MA.

Though Stokinger was following orders as a soldier, he still felt strange about his role in the strike. "I knew what I was," he said. "I was a strike-breaker. Even though I was pretty young, I knew what was going on with that kind of stuff."

So when newspaper photographers came to the building to document the doomed attempt to keep the mail moving, Stokinger tried to hide his identity by putting on his prescription sunglasses. It only made him stand out more in a published newspaper photo of him and other soldiers standing befuddled at a case, trying to sort mail.

Stokinger laughs today at his feeble attempt to hide behind his eyewear. "Sunglasses and trying to read the mail?" he said. "I thought that was pretty funny." **PR**



**Army Spec. Tom Stokinger (above, in sunglasses) was one of the military members ordered to case and deliver mail. After he left the Army, he returned to Massachusetts, where he still lives (left).**



**The military members were an odd sight at this New York City post office**