

A tale of sailors and letter carriers



Philip
Dine

Eugene Parker, active duty Navy, reached out recently, seeking *Postal Record* coverage of the 1990 National Heroes event, where his father had been honored as Eastern Region Hero of the Year.

His late father, Eugene Parker Sr., himself a Navy veteran, carried mail in Virginia.

The write-up chronicled how Parker had saved a young girl being attacked by two dogs on his route. A photo depicted Parker, NALC President Vince Sombrotto—and Sen. John Warner (R-VA). The caption noted that Warner, also a Navy veteran, had personally thanked Parker because, as a child, Warner too had been saved from a dog by a letter carrier.

Two Virginians, two former sailors, two dog rescues; it made sense that Sen. Warner would be there.

But there might be more to it, I thought.

I'd run into Sen. Warner a few years ago on the Capitol Hill grounds. He'd recently retired from Congress, where I'd reported on his Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC). When I said I'd just joined the National Association of Letter Carriers, he mentioned having carried mail in World War II's early days.

Let's pause here and note that this is no ordinary lawmaker. As a 17-year-old, John Warner enlisted in the Navy during WWII, then fought as a Marine in the Korean War. He served as secretary of the Navy in the Vietnam era, before spending 30 years as a U.S. senator, the last 17 as SASC's chairman or ranking member.

With Parker's email, the intersections between a legendary Washington figure and the Post Office led me to don my reporter's hat and call the law firm Warner had started at in 1961, before returning in 2009.

A day later, the phone rang in my office.

"You bring back a happy period of my life," Warner began.

"It was a quiet, basically Southern-oriented Washington, DC that I grew up in," he said—one suddenly transformed into the center of the U.S. military effort in WWII.

With young men being drafted and gasoline being rationed, mail delivery was problematic, especially during the annual Christmas mail surge.

"So the post office went out and hired a bunch of kids, the youngest 15," Warner said.

That offered a young teenager a chance to please his father—a prominent surgeon and a disciplinarian who "believed in work"—while being paid. Thirty days a year, Warner and others carried the mail "by foot, bags over our shoulders

(for) a nice salary, a dollar or two an hour."

"And then at night, they'd offer you overtime, and with 20 cents bus fare you'd all get on a bus and ride down to the main post office near Union Square and start stuffing mail in mailbags or file according to the addresses. An enterprising young man could make a few bucks," he said.

Then it got even better.

"If you were 17 and had a learner's permit to drive, they'd give you an Army truck to deliver packages. It was a thrill to drive that great big old Army truck in the very quiet neighborhood of Washington, DC. Everybody would open their doors and look out. If you had a package, they'd be so thrilled."

The correspondence often involved family members serving overseas.

"It was one for all, all for one, and we were bringing joy to the families, because otherwise the Post Office would never have been able to move that volume of mail," he said. "You felt like you were really doing something in the war effort."

At 17, Warner enlisted in the Navy. His postal experience quickly paid dividends.

"It was a highly disciplined, responsible job. People would say, 'Hey, kid, if you got a problem, we've got to solve it. We've got to keep the mail moving.'

"You kept those lessons when you went to boot camp. It was a good starting point."

Forty-five years later, Warner celebrated 1990's heroes. Why?

"The letter carriers didn't have a lot of representation in Congress. I said, 'Heck, I think I'm the only man in the chamber who's carried mail.' I was attending in the capacity of someone who sort of helped them when issues on the [Senate] floor arose."

Today, Warner, 91, still marvels at his Virginia neighborhood's carriers.

"We have the most able letter carriers; rain or shine, they're always moving fast. I say, 'Slow down, you'll make it.'"

Because Chief Petty Officer Eugene Parker inquired, he got a poignant remembrance of his dad that he plans to frame; John Warner got a chance to recount rich memories he's rarely asked about; and I—and perhaps you—got a revealing glimpse into what letter carriers have meant to this country over the decades.

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