

NALC member recalls the Great Postal Strike from the other side

Some letter carriers can recall participating in the Great Postal Strike of 1970. Not many can say that they also participated in the effort to deliver mail, ordered by President Richard Nixon, while striking letter carriers were walking the picket lines 49 years ago.

On March 17, 1970, **Jeffrey Chester**, who now is a member of Sacramento, CA Branch 133, was an Air Force security airman stationed at McGuire Air Force Base near Trenton, NJ. On that day, New York City Branch 36 members who were fed up with low pay—some postal employees made so little in wages that they qualified for welfare—voted to strike. Thousands walked off the job the next morning, and most postal clerks and drivers honored their picket lines. Mail service in the country's largest city—and financial hub—was shut down.

Within a few days, the mail piled up, the strike began to spread to other cities, and negotiations were going nowhere. By March 23, the crisis prompted President Nixon to declare in a national television address that the strike was an emergency requiring government intervention. Nixon ordered thousands of soldiers, airmen and National Guard members to New York City to get the mail moving. It was only the second time in U.S. history that military personnel were sent to break a strike—the first was during the 1894 Pullman railroad strike in Chicago.

Military personnel in and around New York City, including Chester, converged on mail facilities in the city.

"We were ordered to go to Manhattan to sort mail," Chester recalled. "We stayed there in barracks." Chester

worked a night shift. To catch up with the backlog, and make up for their lack of experience, the military personnel worked in eight-hour shifts around the clock sorting mail—or at least trying to figure out how to sort mail.

"We stayed there in the barracks and were shifted to the Postal Service every evening," he said. "I worked at night. We sat in the clerks' chairs and mail would come in trays in front of us, and we would have to put it in the cubbyholes."

Like most of his fellow soldiers and airmen filling in as postal workers, Chester found sorting the mail to be more difficult than it was for a trained, experienced letter carrier or clerk.

"A tray of mail carried, what, 250 letters? And that

would probably take you an hour, an hour and a half to find the cubbyholes to put them up," he said. "You would pick up so many in your left hand, and you'd have to find the hole to put them in that equated to the ZIP code."

"It was definitely different," he said.

The strike ended four days after Chester arrived, followed quickly by a negotiated settlement with the

Post Office Department and then by congressional approval for a retroactive pay increase for letter carriers and other postal employees. A few months later, Congress enacted a fundamental reform plan that created the U.S. Postal Service as an independent agency and granted collective-bargaining rights to NALC and other postal unions, making the strike, and its aftermath, one of the most important events in NALC history.

Chester was just relieved when the

strike ended and he could get back to his family in New Jersey. "I was glad," he said. "It was a job that I wouldn't want."

Chester didn't know it at the time, but it was a job he would seek later.

After leaving the Air Force in 1983 and moving to San Antonio, TX, Chester found a job as a letter carrier two years later. "I took the test and waited about 16 months," Chester said. While working at a bank, "I got a call for an interview for the Postal Service."

After a year of carrying mail in San Antonio, Chester transferred to Vacaville, CA, and carried the mail there until retiring in 2005. He still lives in the area and is active with his branch—he serves as insurance and health benefits representative and

attends every meeting.

Chester's overall career spanned a period of great change for letter carriers. The strike transformed the Postal Service, but it also brought change to NALC. The union gained the power to bargain for wages and working conditions, and a leader of the strike from Branch 36 who had no elected union position at the time, Vincent Sombrotto, would later be elected national president.

Chester rarely mentioned his unique perspective on the Great Postal Strike of 1970 to other carriers, but at an NALC national convention where he served as a delegate for his branch, carriers who had participated in the strike were asked to stand and be recognized.

"I told the guy off to the side that I was not Postal Service," he recalled, "but I was involved in sorting the mail while I was in the Air Force. I was ordered there."

His fellow carriers are often surprised at his role in the history of the strike, he said, but they don't hold it against him. **PR**



Jeffrey Chester



Jeffrey Chester in his Air Force uniform