

Carrier valor



Philip
Dine

There's a longstanding journalistic adage about illustrating a theme or trend by offering three examples or anecdotes. Two doesn't really cut it, while four begins to resemble a laundry list. Three just seems to work best.

With that in mind, what follows is a trio of letter carrier tales that exemplify service, courage and compassion.

Retired carrier Glenn Oliver, 94, was an Oklahoma farm boy when the Army sent him to serve in the occupation of Japan after its surrender in World War II. Dramatic as his involvement in that historic period was, it was just a table-setter for what followed.

Called up again for the Korean War, he was captured while scouting for enemy forces, leading to an unimaginable 32 months of captivity in a North Korean prison camp.

One of his jobs: to haul away his comrades after they had succumbed to unbearable conditions, including inadequate nutrition and icy cold. But they couldn't even receive a decent burial because the ground was frozen, so the bodies were simply left on the mountain.

Unsure when his own time would come, he subsisted on maize—the very crop fed to cows on his family's farm. Once an armistice was signed, a prisoner exchange was arranged, and an anxious young soldier finally heard his name called.

Glenn's riveting story was recently told by *Tulsa World* reporter Tim Stanley, whose beat focuses on military veterans. After interviewing 130 local WWII veterans, Tim says, "There've been a number who went on to become mail carriers. That is something that I've noticed."

Returning to Oklahoma in the early 1950s, Glenn was an auto mechanic before joining the postal ranks. "Somebody said they had good benefits," his daughter Sally recounted. From 1954 to 1986, the Tulsa Branch 1358 member wore a second uniform and carried mail in Bartlesville.

Linda Culp, a former shop steward who worked with Glenn toward the end of his career, remembers him well. "He was an excellent carrier, excellent," Linda, a Vietnam-era Marine veteran and postal pioneer during her 28 years as a woman carrying mail in Bartlesville, said. "Just perfection in his work."

A postal customer in Charleston, WV, recently surprised his letter carrier with a poem based on the pivotal role another letter carrier had played three-quarters of a century earlier in the then-4-year-old youngster's life.

Things took a positive turn when the customer's father returned from WWII service with the Army Air Corps in the rough China-Burma-India terrain.

To learn about the original letter carrier's actions—and what necessitated his intervention—read the story on page 21. Suffice it to say that after a challenging 18-month period, the boy, Ralph S. Smith, would have a lengthy career as a psychiatrist practicing through today, along with three decades of military service, starting with a Vietnam-era Air Force stint followed by Air National Guard service and promotion to brigadier general, with his father able to participate in the 1998 pinning ceremony.

I told him that never in my time as a reporter had I been uncertain whether to address someone as General Smith or Dr. Smith.

His response: "Just call me Ralph."

All right, Ralph, thank you for remembering—and memorializing—a compassionate letter carrier 75 years later, and for sharing those memories with your current letter carrier.

That carrier, Charleston Branch 531 Treasurer Greg Busby, whose postal career began in 1995, has in turn been moved by Ralph's writing of the poem.

"I always kind of feel like I'm looking out for my neighborhood," he said, "and the fact that somebody was looking out for us was a good feeling.

"I can't wait to talk to him," Greg added, "after he sees that we published it."

The country lost a true patriot a few weeks ago—and NALC lost a good friend—with the passing of John Warner, 94, former chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and a Vietnam-era secretary of the Navy, a sailor in WWII and a Marine in Korea.

I was privileged to report both on Congress and the military during part of his 30-year Senate tenure, and soon after arriving at NALC, had a chance encounter on the Capitol Hill grounds with the retired senator from Virginia.

He told me of "a happy period of my life" when he carried mail as a teenager in WWII's early days, helping "keep the [holiday] mail moving" when so many men were off at war—before himself enlisting to join their ranks at age 17.

Decades later, he would periodically help NALC on the Senate floor, attuned to postal issues because, he said, "I think I'm the only man in the chamber who's carried mail."

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