

A tale on two levels



**Philip
Dine**

This is a story of patriotism and persistence. It's also a story of a branch and bookends and brotherhood.

Back in 1943, Ernie Reda was a 17-year-old senior at Stadium High School in Tacoma, WA, his senior year looming before him. But something larger loomed as well, and soon Ernie—all of 5-foot-6 and 120 pounds—found himself at Normandy, glimpsing bodies of American GIs floating in the water, before engaging in World War II battles elsewhere in Europe and the South Pacific theater.

The Army had come calling a month before graduation, and though Ernie would go on to build a life full of highlights—a loving family, host of close

friends, successful career delivering mail and camaraderie he cherished in Tacoma Branch 130—he longed for the diploma he'd never received.

He talked about it occasionally with his family, but so much time had elapsed that it seemed unobtainable. His daughter, Cindy Anderson, tried; then her daughter, Heather, said she'd take over. "Good luck," Cindy told her. "It's harder than you think."

Heather's retort: "They haven't met me yet."

On a Thursday several months ago, Heather asked her grandfather whether he was busy the following Monday. He asked why, she said she had plans for him, he asked what plans. She responded, "You're going to graduate from high school."

As Cindy puts it, "He just let out a hoop and a holler."

The next day, a colonel arrived with an Army blanket, medals and a hat for Ernie, and the two spent three hours discussing WWII. "My dad was absolutely touched," Cindy said.

The graduation featured Ernie in cap and gown, military personnel, fellow carriers, and his proud family. Ernie sat, dignified—before rising, diploma held high, and exclaiming, "Finally!"

He'd survived 79 years after leaving school, and—just a month earlier—a bout with Covid.

"I'll tell you, Ernie wanted that diploma so bad, tried so hard to get it," fellow retiree Bob Muntz said. Bob, 93, would know. He began carrying mail in 1945 as a sub while still at Stadium High School and met Ernie when the latter began carrying mail in 1955. They were close friends.

"He was on top of the world when he got it," Bob said.

Just weeks later, though, Ernie fell. His health quickly declined, and he passed away in February.

Cindy remembers a post-graduation letter Ernie received from a girl about "how honored she was to be able to walk down the same hallways of that high school that my father walked down, and that she has a whole new perspective on life now. She wanted to give up, but now she knows she has to keep going on."

Another one was from a boy in California, who asked: "What made you so brave and want to go into war? I'm 17, and I can't imagine doing what you did."

Ernie replied, "We were not brave, and we weren't afraid. There was a cause, we went to fight for freedom and for our country, and we were proud to do it."

If this is a story of a graduation in a school, it's also about generations in a branch.

"The Post Office was a family," Cindy recalls. "The postal kids all grew up together. My father was always the one who organized the postal picnics. Most of us were born in the 1950s, and we're all in our 60s and 70s now, and we still talk about it."

Branch 130 President Buddy Matthias calls Ernie "a fixture around here. Ernie meant a lot to the members of our branch."

Buddy, president for 17 months, provides a bookend, arriving "with the very first group of CCAs hired. I was a little surprised that I was accepted as the branch president as quickly as I was," he says.

Dick Bussa has helped connect the generations while expanding the engagement of the tightknit group of retirees. After carrying mail for 46 years, he did retirement seminars for members before being named director of retirees.

"Ernie was what we would consider one of the elders of our branch," Dick said. "He showed up at all the events he could show up at—the retiree lunches, the meetings—and sat front and center. He attended our annual installation of officers dinner in January, escorted by Cindy, who had gotten to be well known among the members."

Cindy says the branch has been "amazing" through the recent ups and downs. "We are going to have Dad's celebration of life at the branch union hall," on his 98th birthday, May 21, she said. "That was the place he loved; that was his second home."

EDITORIAL STAFF:
Director of Communications and Media Relations Philip Dine
Designer/Web Editor Mike Shea
Writer/Editor Rick Hodges
Writer/Editor Jenessa Wagner
Editorial Assistant Clare Foley

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