

Vets, storms and service



**Philip
Dine**

Roberto Santini has a college degree and a decade of experience delivering mail in Puerto Rico. But in dealing with Hurricane Fiona’s devastation and challenges—from safety on the route to management intransigence, damaged carrier homes to the scarcity of necessities like food and gasoline—the Ponce Branch 826 trustee and steward has relied on his Air Force background, including military intelligence.

Responding effectively to Fiona requires remaining calm amidst adversity, setting priorities, drawing sound conclusions and—above all—focusing steadfastly on the key mission: saving lives.

“Best decision I made was going into the Air Force,” he says. “I graduated

college, have a bachelor’s degree, but...I think it was all the Air Force.”

During his four-year stint, he was stationed in northern Japan, a tough neighborhood. Across the water were North Korea, China and Russia—ruled by regimes that are ruthless, highly vigilant and, especially the first, dangerously unpredictable.

Roberto describes his location as being “near Crocodile Den; if you fall in that pond, you’re done.”

He also was stationed in Maryland, working at the National Security Agency (a place so secretive that the old joke was, NSA stood for No Such Agency).

As Roberto dealt with letter carrier needs and stood up to managers, he simultaneously confronted a mud landslide into his house and no electrical or water services.

“It comes down to the training in facing adversity in an already stressful situation,” he says, “where you do a lot of brainstorming and learn to make decisions effectively and quickly, and to not panic.”

Military experience among Puerto Rico’s carriers is hardly rare. “When I joined the Post Office here, in 2012,” Roberto recalls, “there were 50 candidates, and the 50 of us were veterans.”

Branch 826 President Joel Martinez had just assumed office when Fiona’s ferocious winds and cascading waters wiped out roads and infrastructure and created dire problems for members and their families. The nine-year carrier drew upon his dozen years with the Army National Guard, including three years of active duty in the Middle East and at Guantanamo Bay.

He’s visited hard-hit post offices, translated members’ concerns into requests for management to address, kept his reps on the same page and informed NALC of the evolving situation.

“First of all, my background helps in terms of command and control,” Joel says. “When you’re in the military you have to be organized, you have to have control of what you’re dealing with

at the moment. Our union members need somebody to listen to them, to help calm them down and inform them.”

The military taught him to adjust to rapidly shifting circumstances—and to do so with equanimity.

“A person calls me and tells me they’re worried because they couldn’t go to work on Monday, couldn’t leave his wife and kids home with the windows banging,” Joel says. “I have to understand that I cannot stress out, cause confusion among my people,” despite facing his own storm-related hardships. “I have to guide and help, so I can inspire confidence.”

The fact that about two-thirds of Puerto Rico’s carriers are themselves veterans helps in the process.

Overall, more than 1 in 5 letter carriers is wearing his or her second uniform in service to our country.

The man pivotal in Florida’s carriers and post offices getting everything from ice and uniforms to portable laundromats and showers after Hurricane Ian’s colossal damage, has been involved with postal matters for decades, since returning from his second Air Force tour in Vietnam.

Al Friedman, president of the Florida State Association of Letter Carriers and president of Clearwater Branch 2008, used the GI Bill to go to college, then carried mail for three decades while also working for years as a nighttime hospital medical technologist.

He’s also boosted community programs involving hunger, Alzheimer’s, children in need and more.

“The military, how I think it helps you, is you don’t get excited or overwhelmed,” Al says. “I have a mission to do, a goal to reach, a project to get done. I think that’s what the military instills in you.”

Ian slammed Fort Myers, and Branch 2072 President Abel Muniz has had to address his members’ needs while also reassuring them.

“In the military, you have to deal with situations like this, where you don’t know what’s coming but you have to be prepared for what’s coming,” says Abel, whose 23-year Army career included leadership roles peacekeeping in the Balkans and guarding divided Germany’s Cold War borders.

“You have to prepare for the contingencies, strategize and adjust,” he says. “You also have to account for, and take care of, your people. That kind of coincides with what just happened with the Post Office.”

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