



Veterans Affairs benefits and OWCP

Military veterans who suffer a workplace injury while carrying mail are protected by the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA). The Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) is responsible for adjudicating claims under the FECA.

A military veteran filing a claim for an injury as a letter carrier can be confusing when the injury is to the same body part where Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability benefits are being paid. Military veterans should not be discouraged from filing claims if an older military injury is worsened by carrying mail.

OWCP claims can be accepted when letter carrier duties aggravate or accelerate an older underlying condition, including those suffered while on military duty and for which the veteran is receiving VA disability benefits.

OWCP defines aggravation as a relationship that occurs when a pre-existing condition is worsened, whether temporarily or permanently, by an injury that occurs while in the performance of duty as a letter carrier. For instance, a traumatic back injury caused by lifting a parcel may aggravate pre-existing degenerative disc disease, and OWCP compensation would be payable for the duration of the aggravation.

A temporary aggravation involves a limited period of medical treatment and/or disability, after which you return to your previous physical status. A permanent aggravation occurs when a condition will persist indefinitely due to the effects of the work-related injury or when a condition is materially worsened such that it will not revert to its previous level of severity.

Letter carrier duties may also accelerate an underlying condition. A

work-related injury or condition may hasten the development of an underlying condition, and acceleration is said to occur when the ordinary course of the disease does not account for the speed with which a condition develops.

For example, a claimant's VA-accepted knee arthritis may be accelerated by letter carrier duties such as walking, stooping and squatting. An acceptance for acceleration of a condition carries the same force as an acceptance for direct causation. A condition that has been accepted as an acceleration has no set limitation on its duration or severity.

Every claim for a workplace injury needs to be filed via OWCP's ECOMP web portal, which can be accessed at ecomp.dol.gov. Instructions for registering and filing claims via ECOMP can be found at ecomp.dol.gov.

If you do not have a computer to file the claim, the Postal Service is required to provide a computer for your use. To ensure accuracy in your claim filing, never let a supervisor register and file a claim on your behalf.

Once a military veteran's claim is accepted, there may be times when the worker must decide between receiving benefits from the VA or OWCP. For example, if a letter carrier has a pre-existing shoulder injury that the VA has accepted as service-connected for which the VA has granted a disability rating of 20 percent, and the letter carrier further injures that shoulder in the performance of their postal duties, they may be eligible for both OWCP benefits and an increase in their VA disability rating.

Let's say in this example that the VA determines that the on-the-job injury warrants an increase in the rating of the service-connected shoulder disability from 20 to 40 percent. OWCP also determines that injured

letter carrier is eligible for wage-loss compensation. The letter carrier must now elect whether they want compensation from OWCP or the increased VA rating. If the letter carrier elects VA compensation based on the increased rating of 40 percent, they are prohibited from receiving compensation from OWCP. On the other hand, if the letter carrier elects compensation from OWCP, they may still continue to receive VA compensation for the shoulder disability at the pre-injury 20 percent rate as well as their OWCP benefit.

It should be noted here that the VA does not bar the continuation of VA benefits for the disability on which the OWCP benefits were predicated when the OWCP benefits end. In the above example, once the OWCP benefits end, the VA award may be increased to the 40 percent rate for the shoulder disability.

If you are a military veteran who has questions regarding OWCP and VA benefits, contact your national business agent's office.

Join the NALC Veterans Group

The NALC Veterans Group is designed to provide NALC members—both active and retired letter carriers—who are also military veterans the ability to connect with fellow NALC veterans and stay informed on issues of importance to letter carrier veterans. It is free to join.

Members receive a pin as a symbol of gratitude for their military service and membership in NALC.

If you are interested in joining the group, complete the sign-up card at nalc.org/veterans.

Veteran profile: Mark Swan

Though Saginaw, MI Branch 74 letter carrier **Mark Swan** didn't start at USPS until 1985, his postal career began five years earlier when he served in the Navy as a postal clerk on a 6,500-person aircraft carrier.

His goal in joining the Navy was to go to flight school, but he was ultimately denied due to being color blind. Despite not being allowed to achieve his original goal, Swan ended up enjoying his position.

Stationed on an aircraft carrier out of Norfolk, VA, he traveled for nine months around the world. The ship visited nine countries, including Monaco, the Philippines, Australia, France, South Korea and the Ivory Coast.

"It was a lot of fun because I got to do a lot of different things," Swan said.

Although post offices still offer money orders, they aren't as common as they were during Swan's time onboard. One of his main job responsibilities was to send money orders to families of the military men onboard.

Like now, Swan spent much of his time sorting letters. He recalled a time when the ship didn't receive mail for 19 days, then received it all at once. All 13 postal clerks had to sort for seven days just to get through the first-class mail.

But there weren't a lot of other similarities.

"Back in the early days, the jobs were pretty similar," he said. Now that many aspects of letter carrying are automated, his current duties as a letter carrier are not similar to his work as a naval postal clerk.

After his nine months at sea, he noticed that postal clerk positions on touring ships were becoming scarce, so he stayed stationed on an aircraft carrier in Alameda, CA. During his

last four months of military service, he worked at the Air Transfer Office on Mira Island in San Diego, where he sent mail out to the ships each day. He hoped that he would be able to return to sea, but nothing was available for his skill set until only five months before his military service would be up, so they decided not to send him.

"When I got out, I came back to Saginaw, MI, hoping to find a job," he said. "My wife was from Pennsylvania, and we went and visited her family for a couple weeks. I ended up taking the postal exam and I was hired right away."

In 1985 he became a letter carrier in Exton, PA, and joined NALC's Great Valley Merged Branch 4317. Two years later he transferred to Saginaw, because his father was ill, and joined Branch 74.

During the '90s he started to become more engaged in the union, motivated, he says, by "watching some of the things that I felt needed more representation as far as people's rights—and the union president at the time asked me if I wanted to be a union steward."

He was a steward for about 25 years until he became Branch 74 president—a position he holds today. He still carries mail, which he enjoys even 40 years after starting.

"I love the job," he said. "I appreciate the opportunity to be delivering mail because it is a wonderful job. It's gratifying to know that you can do something that makes somebody happy, and I love being outside."



Top: Mark Swan performing postal clerk duties for the Navy

Above: Delivering mail as a letter carrier