

An honor



Philip Dine

“That’s a poppy field down there,” the Army pilot says, as the helicopter hovers over a patch of terrain in desolate southern Afghanistan. “Would you like to land and take some photos?”

I’m reporting on the illicit drug trade that’s turning poppies into opium into heroin and funding the Taliban’s insurgency. This is what I’ve waited for. “That would be great.”

“All right. You have two minutes on the ground.”

“Why two minutes?”

“Because al-Qaeda’s watching these fields.”

“Two minutes will be fine, sir.”

My quarter-century as a journalist exceeded any expectations I had, as two factors fortuitously meshed. My

editors allowed me to choose the topics I’d cover (labor, the military and Congress, plus civil rights and immigration). Having specialized fields helps you build knowledge and contacts and delve deeper into the issues, so my editors let me pursue stories on my own, rather than join the media mob.

Those twin dynamics produced unique reporting opportunities: traversing Eastern Europe from fifth grade classrooms to emptying labor camps to gauge the human impact of communism’s fall, the rough-and-tumble days as the feds pried the Teamsters from Mafia control, the largest strike by Black workers in Mississippi history before other journalists joined in, a year focused on the refugee stream quietly altering the Midwest, Jesse Jackson’s pioneering presidential bid (with one probing interview prompting the reverend to exclaim, “You know more about *me* than I know about *me*!”), sheltering on a Navy warship in the Persian Gulf and in Army tents in Kuwait’s desert as U.S. troops prepared to invade Iraq, the decades-long ascent of a coal miner reformer named Rich Trumka, entering a smoldering Pentagon on 9/11 hours after encountering David McCullough on a Washington sidewalk and querying the greatest living U.S. historian about what this day augured for the future.

In 2008, I deployed such adventures in a book about the state of labor, including its ineffective communications. I then bid farewell to journalism, certain that no other job would prove as gratifying.

NALC has proved me wrong.

It’s been an honor to edit *The Postal Record* and lead NALC’s media engagement for 15 years. (Note: I’m not leaving NALC, rather moving to a new role writing longform about its history, accomplishments and challenges, to provide current/future members with shared information.)

My tenure as director of communications and media rela-

tions has been just as fulfilling as my time wandering hither and yon with a notebook and pen. How so?

First and foremost, the chance to work with America’s letter carriers. A day hasn’t gone by without offering new reasons to be awed by your grit and knowledge and dedication. Any success we’ve achieved in reshaping the public conversation about postal matters rests squarely on the shoulders of NALC members and your willingness to help deliver our message.

Second, the foresight and trust of our national leadership. Upon my arrival in 2010, this magazine and more (internal communications) and NALC’s media efforts (external) were merged into one department, creating a complementary process whereby letter carriers armed with up-to-date info get out the message. Our leaders also let us make this a unionwide effort—rare in a U.S. labor movement whose top-down approach spawns poor messaging. Our foes couldn’t match the coast-to-coast energy of rank-and-file carriers as NALC fought, for example, to end pre-funding. On a personal level, I treasured the one-on-ones with so many of you as you prepped for an interview with a reporter, then watched with pride as you aced it.

Something that surprised me was the nexus between working in the media and dealing from outside with journalists. Having walked in their shoes and speaking their language made it easier to influence their reporting. When I’d weigh in on what they should cover and how, rather than show resentment they engaged like newsroom colleagues. If, for example, I drew a red line—“You write about the black-market value of Arrow Keys, you’ll put a target on letter carriers and we’re not working with you”—they’d reassess their approach, even request help persuading their editor.

Third, our superb communications co-workers. Their skills are evident in the magazine’s quality, reflected in national awards regularly outpacing unions with far-larger staffs. Jenessa is a remarkable copyeditor, and her feature stories are works of art. Rick, a gifted storyteller, produces page-turning stories. Mike’s impressive ability to efficiently manage all aspects of this magazine and beyond is vital. Our stability is a source of pride; for 15 years the four of us have worked together. We’ve also had a succession of talented editorial assistants. I couldn’t have worked with a better group of folks.

Two minutes, 15 years, all a privilege.

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The Postal Record (ISSN 0032-5376) is published monthly by the National Association of Letter Carriers. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, NALC, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144.

Subscription included in membership dues. First-class subscription available for \$20 per year (contact Membership Department).

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Circulation: 287,000. Union-printed using soy-based inks.

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