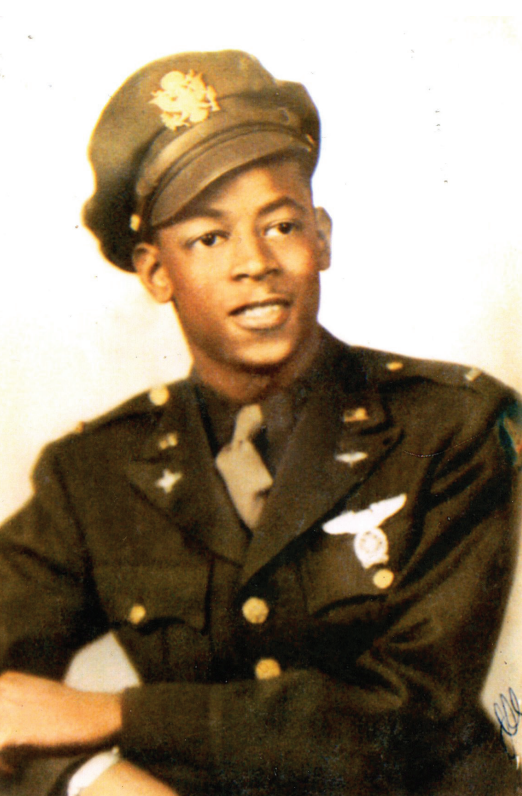


VETERAN PRESENCE



Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson

Many military veterans trade one uniform for another when they become letter carriers. But their service never stops. What follows is a collection of stories about veterans who have worked or still are working to make a difference in their communities.

POST OFFICE RENAMED FOR TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

A post office in Mt. Clemens, MI, is now the “Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson Post Office” to honor a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first Black military aviators to fight for the United States, who later became a letter carrier.

Jefferson was born in Detroit, MI, in 1921. During World War II, he received flight training with other Black airmen in Tuskegee, AL, and served with the 332nd Fighter Group as a P-51 “Red Tail” pilot based in Italy. He was part of a fighter escort wing, which would protect the bombing missions of the U.S. 15th Air Force by attacking key ground targets, and would guard the bombing mission against enemy fighters. On his 19th mission, Jefferson was shot down over Toulon, France, and captured by German troops. He spent the rest of the war in POW camps in Poland and Bavaria until he was liberated by Gen. George Patton’s Third Army.

Upon returning to Michigan, he worked as a letter carrier while earning his teaching certificate. He later earned

a master’s degree in education from Wayne State University in 1953. Retiring from the Air Force Reserves in 1969 with the rank of lieutenant colonel, he dedicated 31 years to the Detroit Public School System, retiring in 1979 as an assistant principal.

Jefferson was awarded the Purple Heart in 2001 and, along with the other Tuskegee Airmen, the Congressional Gold Medal in 2007. He is also recognized on the Wall of Honor in the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC. He died on June 22, 2022, at age 100.

The post office was renamed in a ceremony on July 21 attended by Sen. Gary Peters (D-MI), who sponsored the legislation to change the name, by Jefferson’s granddaughter Earnestine Lavergne and by nearly a dozen letter carriers and other postal employees at the post office who are veterans.

“Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson served his country with distinction with the Tuskegee Airmen, and cemented himself in local history as a dedicated educator and letter carrier,” Sen. Peters said. “I was proud to lead legislation dedicating the Mount Clemens post office in his name, helping to ensure his life and legacy are remembered for future generations.”

VETERAN, CARRIER, COUNCIL MEMBER, MONUMENT-MAKER

He’s a veteran, a letter carrier and president of his branch, and a city council member. **Jamie Lukens** knows what leadership means, and he led the creation of a veteran’s memorial in his town that was dedicated on July 4.

Lukens, president of Barberton, OH Branch 897, pushed for legislation to create and partly fund the memorial, with the rest of the costs coming from private donations. But his history of leadership began in 1993 when he

The dedication ceremony





The monument to military veterans in Norton, OH

joined the Army a few months after graduating from high school.

"It seemed like a logical choice. College wasn't really something I was interested in at the time," he said. He served until October 1997, including a deployment to the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia.

"I'm very patriotic," he said. "I just feel like we live in the best country in the world. And that was part of the reason why I wanted to serve my country."

After the Army, Lukens went straight to the Postal Service. "I heard the Post Office was hiring, and it was good work, and it was steady work," he said. "So, I applied. I got hired in the Post Office about six weeks after being out of the military."

He started carrying the mail in Barberton. After working as a casual and a temporary employee, and moving to another area for a while, Lukens became a full-time carrier and a union activist, working his way up to president of his branch in 2017.

Along the way, he became a letter carrier congressional liaison (LCCL), his first direct involvement in the political world.

"I was asked to be the letter carrier congressional liaison for my region here in Ohio, for the letter carriers. And I never was really politically involved or anything before that," he said. But working as a LCCL showed him a new side of leadership.

"After I started [serving as] the letter carrier congressional liaison, I was like, 'This is interesting,'" he said. "To me, it's a fascinating part of our country."

When some citizens of Norton, the town next to Barberton where he lives, asked if he'd like to run for city council, his experience as a LCCL moved him to try.

In most U.S. cities and towns, running for city council isn't an option for active carriers because of the Hatch Act, which forbids federal and postal employees from engaging in partisan activities, including running for office as a member of a political party. But Norton is one of the rare cities where parties don't nominate candidates and the ballot doesn't show party labels.

Lukens ran for a council seat in 2021 and won. This year, he is running for reelection unopposed, so he hopes to start his second term in January.

As a new council member, Lukens set to work on his goal of creating a monument to the area's military veterans, including a memorial to those lost in battle. With seed money from the city and private donations, including a donation from his branch and the sale of memorial paving bricks with engraved names incorporated into the monument, the town created Lukens's vision and dedicated it on the Fourth of July.

"It's dedicated in honor and memory of all of our military veterans from all the different military branches," Lukens said.

While the monument encompasses the various military branches, the walkway leading to it recognizes individual veterans. "It's a walkway that zigzags up to the main memorial," he said. "And we have that portion filled with memorial pavers that residents



Lukens and his wife, Chrys

were able to purchase. It could be for any military veteran, loved one, whether they're deceased or alive. We have all kinds of personalized memorial pavers that residents have bought for their loved ones."

Lukens said that other towns should emulate Norton and other places with similar monuments.

"I think that every city should have a veterans memorial," he said. "We owe our veterans a debt of gratitude, whether it's combat veterans or just veterans that didn't go to combat. It's a big part of our freedom in our country."

"I plan on taking my grandkids" to the monument, Lukens added. "Hopefully, I'm alive and I have great-grandkids when I'm heading down there with a walker or a chair to show them." **PR**