



NALC's Military Veterans

Different Uniforms Continued Service



When military veterans leave the service, many of them look no further than the other service—the U.S. Postal Service—for good jobs. With about 130,000 vets on its rolls, including one in four letter carriers, the USPS is the largest civilian employer of veterans. Many veterans adjusting to civilian life, including those returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, find that carrying the mail is a good career.

Veterans working for USPS bring vital skills and attitudes to their jobs.

“In the military, you serve your country; in the Post Office, you serve the community,” said **Joe Hall**, past president of Kingsport, TN Branch 1999, who served in active duty in the Army from 1997 to 2001.

Military service gives veterans the essential qualities of a letter carrier—and then some—including physical toughness, a can-do attitude, the desire to serve their communities, reliability, situational awareness, and the courage and steadiness to deal with the unexpected or step in when they confront an emergency.

Serving the community by going out on a route alone is an essential part of a letter carrier’s job, and it requires someone who is reliable and trustworthy. Veterans fit the bill. “A lot of veterans have discipline, and with discipline comes integrity,” Hall said. “It means doing the right thing when no one is looking.”

Hall was deployed twice to the Balkans while on active duty (one of his jobs in Kosovo was setting up postal operations). Seeking a more stable existence with his family, Hall left the Army in 2001 and joined the Postal Service, but served in the reserves as a drill sergeant for four more years.

The Postal Service is similar to the military in other ways, Hall observed. He still wears a uniform. He does





Pictured with this article are just a few of the photos of NALC military veterans we received. On the cover is Air Force vet Annette Taylor.



Delayed Recognition

Sometimes it takes a long time for veterans to get the recognition they deserve, but two letter carrier veterans recently received long-overdue medals to honor their military service.

President Obama awarded retired Austin, TX, letter carrier Santiago Erevia the Medal of Honor in March for his heroic charge of an enemy position under heavy fire. Erevia received the honor after Congress mandated a review of cases where veterans may have been denied appropriate recognition due to prejudice.

In 2011, retired St. Louis Branch 343 member **James Wilkes, 90**, was recognized for his role in military history. Wilkes was among the first group of black men admitted to the Marine Corps in 1942. Congress enacted a law awarding him and the other African-Americans in that first class of Marines the Congressional Gold Medal.

After leaving the Marine Corps, Wilkes signed up as a letter carrier in his hometown of St. Louis in 1953. Though he confronted racial prejudice in both jobs, Wilkes doesn't focus on the negatives.

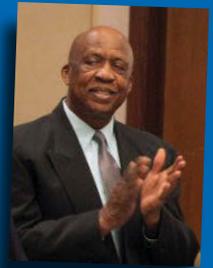
"I had a wonderful experience in the Marine Corps and a wonderful experience in the Postal Service," he said.

Wilkes and other black recruits were not sent to the regular training site, Camp Lejeune, NC. Instead, they were segregated in a nearby facility called Montford Point. They received a cold shoulder from many white Marines and local residents, though some white officers stood up for them. Still, Wilkes remembers the overall experience fondly.

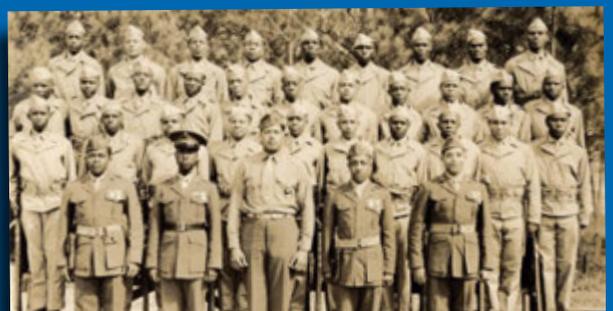
"I had a job to do," he said. "I'm very proud of what I did."

Until the end of the war, Wilkes served in administrative positions for the Marine Corps, including quartermaster and motor vehicle operations.

"I learned more in the Marine Corps than in any educational institution," Wilkes added. One thing he learned, which he took to his career in the Postal Service, was "don't worry about the little stuff. Little stuff will drive you nuts." PR



Above: Wilkes
Below: The Montford Point Marines



his job as part of a unit, with thousands working together to make the improbable happen every day—moving millions of pieces of mail and visiting nearly every home and business in the country six days a week. Their achievements are measured collectively as union members, too.

"We're one unit," he said. "If we make good numbers in the food drive, we do it as a unit. If we raise a lot of money for MDA, we do it as a unit."

And when new carriers come to the workroom floor, he said, it's often the carriers with military backgrounds who are first to welcome them and help them learn the ropes and find their place, just as they would have with new troops.

"We just take them under our wing," Hall said.

The outdoor factor

There's another, more practical trait that many veterans bring to the job of carrying mail, Hall said: Many vets enjoy physical activity and learn to deal with bad weather.

"What attracted me to the job is it keeps me in shape," Hall said. "I'm one of those people who don't like to sit still. I like to work." And when cold or heat or rain or snow get in the way, he's used to biting the bullet.

In fact, some veterans say they look forward to the challenge of bad weather.

"Those were the days I wanted to be outside," Army veteran and retired Yonkers, NY Branch 387 member **Sam Riti** said. "Trampling through snow was fun." His Army experience prepared him for the challenge of walking his route. Riti walked a tough route in Colonial Heights, NY, for 27 of his 39 years with the Postal Service. "Seven miles a day; nothing but hills and steps," he said.

That combination of physical and mental toughness makes a typical veteran ready to carry mail, Riti said. "Where there's a will, a GI will find a way to get it done." Riti even refused to come back to his station when many New York-area carriers were called back after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, finishing his route instead.

With his security clearance to work with nuclear weapons, Riti tested weapons and equipment at Ft. Hood, TX, until leaving the Army in 1968, but his record of service had only begun. He has a long list of awards and recognitions for his many activities in the schools, hospitals, active duty and veterans groups and other community groups in Yonkers, along with serving as a steward and safety captain for his branch. He started by organizing blood drives among postal workers, an activity he had participated in at Ft. Hood.

In March, national veterans group AMVETS recognized Riti's service to his fellow vets by naming him National AMVET of the Year.



Vet to the Rescue

Paul Stetka was looking forward to a special day, but it quickly turned into a day of danger—before a letter carrier saved the day.

It was a summer day in the mid-1960s (1965 or 1966) and Stetka, then a young boy of 4 or 5, was at his grandparents' house in Racine, WI, waiting for his grandfather to turn on the new color television—a relative rarity in those days. His grandfather, Joseph Pfaffl, who lived on Dwight Street, had just bought the TV, and everyone was eagerly waiting.

"It was supposed to be a grand unveiling of color TV," Stetka recalls, "but instead it was the grand unveiling of fire and sparks."

His grandfather, an electrician by trade who had been born in Germany in the mid-1800s, had changed the plug and chord on the back of the set before plugging it in.

"He plugged it in, and if the darn thing didn't explode in the back, sending sparks and flames up the wall and up the stairs. My grandmother, who was in a wheelchair, was freaking out," Stetka says, and she wasn't alone.

At that moment, the family's letter carrier entered the house. Given the warm weather, the front door was open.

"Everyone was afraid to grab the plug, because of the sparks, but he grabbed the plug, so everyone was able to put out the fire," Stetka says. "It was an amazing feat. We have never forgotten that in our family to this day."

Stetka noticed that instead of hands, the letter carrier had pincers, and a young boy's inquisitiveness took over.

"I asked him, 'Where are your hands?'"

"He said, 'I lost them in the war.'"

Since the carrier appeared to be in his late 40s, Stetka assumes that he was referring to World War II. Stetka also lived in Racine, but had a different carrier, Barney Henkes. Stetka's father was a postal clerk in West Racine for 30 years.

Stetka now lives in Madison and is president of a company that does sales and training in the area of senior care. He hopes that someone will be able to identify the hero carrier. If so, send an email to postalrecord@nalc.org.

"In our family, that guy was a complete hero, being able to come in and pull the cord out of the wall, with the sparks and the fire, being incredibly unafraid. He got to be a hero again," he says. "To this day, that story has resonated in our family, but we could never remember the postman's name."

"If anybody knows anything, I'd be so happy. That would be amazing. I'd love to be able to tell his children and grandchildren the story." PR

A good landing spot

Riti joined the Post Office after serving in the Army during the Vietnam era, part of a wave of vets who swelled the ranks of the Postal Service in the 1970s and 1980s. By 1987, half the letter carriers on the street had served in the armed forces. That proportion has dropped, but as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan wound down, and as the Postal Service began hiring carriers at a faster pace, vets seeking jobs may push the number higher again.

When they take the exam for a postal or other federal civil service job, veterans may get a certain number of "preference points" added to their passing score based on when or where they served, disability, or other factors that could help them get hired faster. As the Postal Service has begun hiring city carrier assistants (CCAs), the opportunity for veterans to find a good landing spot in the civilian workforce by becoming letter carriers is growing.

That's good news for recent veterans who are struggling harder to find jobs. The unemployment rate for vets who served in active duty since September 2001 was 9 percent at the end of last year, which added up to 205,000 job-seekers. That's higher than the jobless rate among all vets and among civilians; both stood at around 6.7 percent at the end of 2013.

Many job-seeking vets who served after 2001, especially those who started their adult lives in the military, say they feel their lack of civilian job experience is holding them back, and their military skills don't always transfer directly to a civilian job. But as any carrier, veteran or not, can tell you, carrying mail requires tenacity, physical and mental endurance and pride in your work—traits that military service build in every veteran.

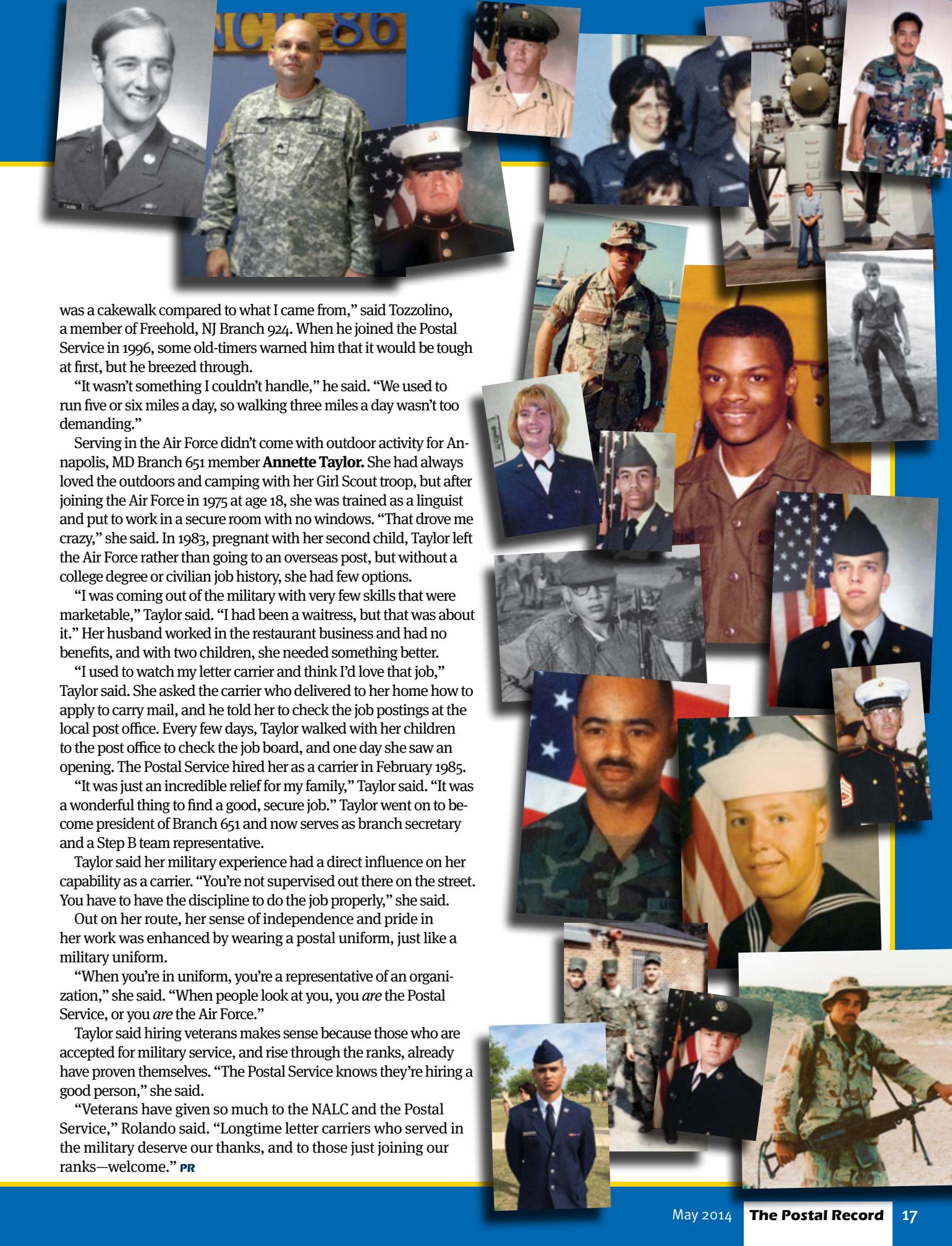
"The Postal Service is a good landing place for veterans entering civilian life," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "USPS needs their skills and their attitude. Joining the USPS is a good way to start. It's a great job to continue to serve America and your community."

During an emergency, serving the community can take on a new meaning for a letter carrier. While out on his route in 2012, former Marine **David Tozzolino** rescued a motorist from a car accident that had caused a natural gas leak.

Whether acting to save a life or just helping customers and doing the job right from day to day, a carrier with a military background doesn't need to think before doing the right thing, Tozzolino said.

"It's instinctual," he said. "I think that's what the military brings—instinct." He cited the quick reactions of fellow carriers honored as heroes who relied on military training to step in when they confronted a crisis.

After four years in the Marine Corps in the early 1990s, Tozzolino said he handled the rigors of carrying mail without a hitch. "This



was a cakewalk compared to what I came from,” said Tozzolino, a member of Freehold, NJ Branch 924. When he joined the Postal Service in 1996, some old-timers warned him that it would be tough at first, but he breezed through.

“It wasn’t something I couldn’t handle,” he said. “We used to run five or six miles a day, so walking three miles a day wasn’t too demanding.”

Serving in the Air Force didn’t come with outdoor activity for Annapolis, MD Branch 651 member **Annette Taylor**. She had always loved the outdoors and camping with her Girl Scout troop, but after joining the Air Force in 1975 at age 18, she was trained as a linguist and put to work in a secure room with no windows. “That drove me crazy,” she said. In 1983, pregnant with her second child, Taylor left the Air Force rather than going to an overseas post, but without a college degree or civilian job history, she had few options.

“I was coming out of the military with very few skills that were marketable,” Taylor said. “I had been a waitress, but that was about it.” Her husband worked in the restaurant business and had no benefits, and with two children, she needed something better.

“I used to watch my letter carrier and think I’d love that job,” Taylor said. She asked the carrier who delivered to her home how to apply to carry mail, and he told her to check the job postings at the local post office. Every few days, Taylor walked with her children to the post office to check the job board, and one day she saw an opening. The Postal Service hired her as a carrier in February 1985.

“It was just an incredible relief for my family,” Taylor said. “It was a wonderful thing to find a good, secure job.” Taylor went on to become president of Branch 651 and now serves as branch secretary and a Step B team representative.

Taylor said her military experience had a direct influence on her capability as a carrier. “You’re not supervised out there on the street. You have to have the discipline to do the job properly,” she said.

Out on her route, her sense of independence and pride in her work was enhanced by wearing a postal uniform, just like a military uniform.

“When you’re in uniform, you’re a representative of an organization,” she said. “When people look at you, you *are* the Postal Service, or you *are* the Air Force.”

Taylor said hiring veterans makes sense because those who are accepted for military service, and rise through the ranks, already have proven themselves. “The Postal Service knows they’re hiring a good person,” she said.

“Veterans have given so much to the NALC and the Postal Service,” Rolando said. “Longtime letter carriers who served in the military deserve our thanks, and to those just joining our ranks—welcome.” **PR**