

He sat in electric chair

Service in South Pacific led Marine to law career

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After 50 years of reading articles on his court cases, settlements, and trials and tribulations of being a lawyer in Southside Virginia, it's time Courier-Record readers meet the man behind the name.

George S. Cummins of Blackstone will have been practicing law 50 years, come next January.

Aside from serving as Commonwealth's Attorney in Nottoway County from February 1966 to December 1979, Mr. Cummins has owned his own practice on Main Street since September 1953.

His work, however, does not end in the court room. In the 50's, Mr. Cummins served as Nottoway County Chairman of the American Red Cross. He was also a member of several civic organizations.

Mr. Cummins says he's "semi-retired" now, which allows for time to reflect on the last 50 years.

Mr. Cummins recently was kind enough to sit down with the Courier-Record and share memories, experiences, and thoughts on years past.

This is not a case review or an urgent news break.

This is a story about a man.

Rooted in Virginia

George Cummins was born in Rhode Island May 19, 1922. His roots, however, are planted firmly in Nottoway County.

"My people are native Virginians," says Cummins proudly. "I happened to be born outside of Virginia simply because my parents were in Rhode Island at the time."

His Virginia roots run deep. Mr. Cummins' great-grandfather, Wesley Cummins, was Robert E. Lee's chaplain during the Civil War.

Cummins's grandfather, a life-long resident of Nottoway County, is reputed to have been engineer



of the first Norfolk Western train to stop in Crewe, which was previously known as Robertson's Switch.

Cummins grew up in Crewe and attended Crewe High School. It was there that he met his wife, Florence.

"The door opened in the classroom, and our principal walked in," Cummins recalls. "It was September 1938."

"He had a little girl by the hand, a pretty girl. And he asked our teacher if he could introduce her to the class."

"I was sitting in the back of the room next to another boy. I remember it well," he says smiling. "I punched him and said, 'I'm going to marry that girl! I'd never seen her before!'"

Leaving Home

Mr. Cummins did not finish high school.

"I ran away from high school in my second year," says Cummins. "I joined the Marines in 1940, and two years later, I was trapped by the war."

Cummins ended up in the Pacific, spending time in Guadalcanal, New Guinea, and Australia during US war

with the Japanese Empire.

After the war while visiting family in New Jersey, someone suggested he take advantage of the newly-passed GI Bill, which paid for returning soldiers' college educations.

Chance worth taking

When deciding whether to go to college and take advantage of the GI Bill, Cummins faced one problem.

"I quit after a year and a half of high school," says Cummins. "I still had two and a half years of high school left to do."

With encouragement from family members, Cummins went and talked to Rutgers University, which informed him that, if he passed the entrance exam, he would be admitted.

The entrance exam was an eye-opener, to say the least.

"I was intimidated," says Cummins. "I was in a room of graduating seniors...these kids looked so young, they were 17-years-old! I was 23 and had been fighting a war for three years."

Never too late

After Cummins took and passed the entrance exam at Rutgers University, the dean wrote Nottoway County School Board a letter.

The Dean informed Nottoway Schools that Cummins had one of the highest scores on Rutgers' entrance exam, and they would be admitting him without a high school diploma.

Because of Cummins' accomplishment, the dean urged Nottoway to grant Cummins a high school diploma.

In Cummins' law office on Main Street above his desk hangs a diploma from Crewe High School, dated 1945.

"The moral of that story," says Cummins laughing, "is don't believe everything you see. That paper says I graduated in 1945. I had been fighting in the Pacific 2 or 3 years before 1945!"

Meanwhile...

Cummins did not forget the little girl introduced to his class in September 1938.

Her name was Florence Fahrback. While he was in the Pacific, Florence corresponded with Cummins frequently.

Cummins chuckles, "I think I sent her a penny postcard once. She says that's all I did, sent her a penny postcard."

Nine years after the day they met, Cummins married Florence. They will have been married 55 years August 23 of this year, having two sons along the way.

He remembers their wedding day fondly.

"It was the greatest day of my life," says Cummins. "I owe everything I've got to her."

Florence went to New Jersey with Cummins while he finished his undergraduate work at Rutgers University.

Cummins then decided to attend law school. He completed one year at Rutgers' School of Law, and received his LLB in 1951 from Washington and Lee University in Lexington.

Cummins moved to Lexington with the idea that if he was going to practice law in Virginia, he should graduate from a law school in Virginia.

Immediately after law school,

Cummins worked as a Staff Adjustor for Kemper Insurance in Richmond and Charlottesville.

"I was trying to get together enough money and contacts to open my own office," says Cummins. "I didn't have any money when I left law school. Very few people had much money back then."

First case

Mr. and Mrs. Cummins had settled at Battleview Farm in Nottoway County. It was there that Cummins picked up his first case.

"A lady came up to the house knocking on the door; she had heard I was a lawyer," recalls Cummins. "I told her I had a license, but I did not have an office. Bottom line is I ended up taking her case and handling her divorce."

"It was my first case, and I didn't even have an office," says Cummins laughing. "I think I had two or three law books in the trunk of my car."

Cummins opened his own practice on September 1, 1953 at 220 South Main Street in Blackstone.

"I was afraid the phone wouldn't ring," says Cummins, "and I was afraid that it would ring."

Fateful phone call

Cummins served as Nottoway Commonwealth's Attorney from 1966 to 1979. Looking back, he admits that practicing law can be hard on the soul. He remembers advice he received when he began practicing.

"Judge Jefferson, my first judge, used to say... 'I'm finished with a case by the time I get home. I've cleared my mind like a wet rag across a blackboard.'"

"Of course, being a Judge in 4 or 5 counties, he carried a tremendous responsibility," says Cummins. "But I guess the same thing could apply to a lawyer."

Despite an effort to leave closed cases in the past, Cummins also admits that there are some trials that "stand out rather starkly."

Cummins particularly remembers the Ward Murder trial.

"Mrs. Ward was well-known in her church and in the community," says Cummins. "A Fort Pickett soldier slaughtered her. I was appointed by the judge to be his lawyer because he didn't have any money. Horrible

case, horrible pictures."

Cummins remembers the trial well, considering the soldier's fate was decided by a phone call.

"He was on his way to the electric chair," says Cummins. "The case built against him was strong."

"I believe it was after the second day of the trial," Cummins recalls. "I came back to my office around midnight to do further work on that file. The phone rang."

"I thought, 'A phone call at midnight?' It was a local merchant. And he said, 'George, will you let me tell you something for a few minutes?'"

The local merchant, who later testified during the trial, informed Cummins that he had been looking out the window at the alleged time of the murder, and that he had seen three men run out of Mrs. Ward's home that night. He was not sure what that did to the case itself, but his conscience was heavy, and he simply wanted Cummins to know.

"I knew what it meant," says Cummins. "It meant I was going to save that boy's life. Up until that point, all evidence concentrated on the defendant alone, and now I had a witness that said there was not one, but three people running from that house the night of the murder."

Cummins says introduction of his surprise witness shocked everyone, including the prosecutor, who made the horrible mistake of asking the merchant to repeat his testimony during cross-examination.

"Word for word, he repeated it," says Cummins. "And that only sunk it deeper into the minds of the jury. So much for the single defendant theory."

"The jury found him guilty," adds Cummins. "Gave him 50 years. But 50 years beats the electric chair."

"That case... I'll go to the grave remembering every bit of it!"

Not always easy

Many people have asked Cummins how he handles representing someone whom he believes is guilty of committing a crime.

"You have to give him that which he is entitled," says Cummins. "And what he is entitled to is a fair trial."

"Fair trials are not distributed among criminal defendants according to how one might feel about distributing them," Cummins continues. "A lawyer has to be able

to disregard or sublimate his own feelings and preconditions, in order to give the defendant a fair trial. Not necessarily a victory. A fair trial."

"While it's not always easy, it's do-able."

Cummins confronted the question of duty when he was assigned the prosecution of a Nottoway County Sheriff.

Prosecuting the Sheriff was difficult for Cummins because, being the Commonwealth's Attorney, he worked closely with him.

The sheriff was found guilty and forced to resign from office.

"There is no way his friends or his people will ever really understand how much prosecuting him did to me emotionally," Cummins says. "But in that office, there is one credible word you cannot overlook. That word is duty."

Takes a seat

A group of Virginia District Attorneys were once invited to tour the Richmond Penitentiary on Spring Street. Cummins was among those in the group.

Part of the tour included Death Row. Cummins asked to see the execution chamber.

"The biggest thing in there was that electric chair," Cummins recalls. "This was during the Moratorium, when the US Supreme Court had outlawed capital punishment for a few years. They reinstated it after a fairer system was developed."

"So I went and sat down in the electric chair," says Cummins. "No one else did, and the [tour guide] asked me why I wanted to do that."

"I told him I wanted to know what it was like in case I ever had to put someone in that chair. I was very much affected by the fact that 120 or so people had lost their lives sitting in that same chair."

"It was a crazy thing to do," admits Cummins. "But I've always had mixed emotions about capital punishment."

Like a smoke stack

Cummins has seen a great deal of change throughout the years, especially in the court room.

"Everybody in those days smoked cigarettes," says Cummins. "We would come into court, and the judge, if he was a smoker, would smoke sitting on the bench! And the lawyers, sitting at their tables, would smoke. Members of the audience smoked if they wanted to. There was no ban on smoking."

Well the question is, did Mr. Cummins smoke?

"Like a smoke stack," says Cummins, laughing. "I didn't quit until about 8 years ago."

"I never saw our district judge in a robe," says Cummins. "Judges didn't wear robes then. Life was just simpler, plainer, with less extreme formality."

"The present courthouse in Nottoway has just finished its third renovation in 50 years," says Cummins. "No one would believe what it looked like in 1953, how simplistic and old fashioned it was."

"Progress"

Cummins is also aware of change in the Town of Blackstone itself.

"There are businesses on Main Street in jeopardy of closing," says Cummins, "and it concerns me because if something doesn't replace them, what have you got? A ghost town?"

Cummins says the coming of businesses such as Wal-Mart are "changing the business picture in small towns."

"I guess the word is progress," says Cummins, "if you insist on calling it 'progress.' And maybe it IS progress. But the young people don't seem to be wanting to hang around in small towns. There's just not enough here, and I guess that's what's causing it. The word progress."

Good and evil

Cummins remembers his first encounter with television well.

He was living with a married couple, the Fullers, at the time, and still attending classes at Rutgers.

Cummins came home from class one day to find Mr. Fuller and a man in a white jump suite assembling the Television. He watched them tinker with the contraption for a while, then told Mr. Fuller what he thought about it.

"I told Mr. Fuller, 'if that thing

y'all are putting together will do what I'm told it will do, there is more good in it, and more evil in it, than anything man ever created beginning with the wheel."

"I still believe that today," says Cummins. "I don't know of anything else with that kind of power, with the good and evil in it, to affect every human being on Earth."

Cummins, however, is not anti-television. In fact, an old black and white television sits behind his desk at his office.

"I like television," says Cummins. "I use it to keep up with the market and the news, but I don't watch many programs."

"I think it has a tendency to affect young minds," Cummins continues. "It's involving young minds in areas where they ought not be involved."

A rock without handles

Perhaps one of the most talked about events at the present is September 11. Cummins was taken back 60 years when he heard that the World Trade Center, as well as the Pentagon, had been attacked.

"My mind ran back to December 7, 1941," says Cummins. "I was in the Marines, at home in Crewe, on furlough."

"I remember being downtown, and someone came in and said, 'Have y'all heard the news? Pearl Harbor is being bombed!'"

"My furlough was cancelled," continues Cummins. "I had to report to North Carolina immediately, and two months later, I was in Guadalcanal."

Cummins feels the same about 9/11 as he does December 7, 1941.

"We had an act of war committed upon us," says Cummins. "A horrible tragedy."

Cummins does however, recognize the difference between the two attacks.

"December 7 was an act of war that we could manage," says Cummins. "It took us about 5 years, but we managed it."

"9/11 reminds me of a story of two farmers in a field," Cummins continues. "There's a huge rock out in the field, and one farmer says to the other, 'You ought to get rid of that rock.' And the other farmer replies, 'I want to do that, but it ain't

got no handles on it.' Meaning, he didn't know how to pick it up."

"I'm not sure where the handles are on this rock," says Cummins, referring to terrorism. "The distinction between the attack on Pearl Harbor and 9/11 is that, with Pearl Harbor, we had a recognizable enemy, and that was the Japanese Empire."

"Our enemy in the current war is insanity," says Cummins. "We've never had an enemy like that before. How do you deal with that kind of enemy? How do you touch it, feel it, see it? You don't know who you're looking at is insane. They don't carry signs!"

Crossroads

After having some time to reflect on his past, Cummins sees that there are times when he was faced with decisions that affected the rest of his life.

He recalls his last year in law school, when the FBI held a seminar to recruit new agents.

"The literature they gave us," says Cummins, "said, 'If you expect your children to remain in one school, forget us, because you're subject to transfer. If you expect to be a member of a church, forget us because you are subject to transfer.'"

Cummins chuckles, "My wife took one look at that information and said, 'Well, I can tell you right now, you can forget this. I want a stable home.'"

"Suppose my wife had said yes," Cummins adds. "I'd now be a retired FBI agent, living God knows where, doing God knows what."

Cummins believes everyone reaches a crossroad such as this at some point in their life.

"There are some crossroads that are terribly important," says Cummins. "Education... Marriage... Your career."

There are no signs," Cummins offers as a final thought.

"Crossroads in life. They can be life-makers or life-breakers."

"But there are no signs."