

Murtha dead at 77: Longest-serving Pa. congressman

February 09, 2010

By RANDY GRIFFITH

The Tribune-Democrat

U.S. Rep. John Patrick Murtha Jr., the former Marine and businessman who saw the region through flood and economic upheavals, died Monday at Virginia Hospital Center in Arlington, Va.

The 77-year-old Democrat underwent gallbladder surgery on Jan. 28 at National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., but developed an infection and other complications. A native of West Virginia, Murtha grew up in Westmoreland County, but came to Johnstown and opened a car wash in 1956 on Somerset Street

He first ran for office in 1968, but failed to unseat the late Republican U.S. Rep. John Saylor in a close race for the former 22nd Congressional District seat.

The next spring, he was elected to the state House in a special election following the death of Rep. Edward W. McNally, namesake of the McNally Bridge on Route 219. He was elected to the 12th Congressional District seat in a special election Feb. 5, 1974, following Saylor's death in October 1973. Murtha surprised many when he edged former Saylor aide Harry Fox of Armstrong County by 122 votes in the heavily Republican district.

On Saturday, Murtha officially marked the 36-year milestone, becoming the longest-serving Congressman in Pennsylvania history.

Although he was not sworn into office until Feb. 20, 1974, House rules state Murtha's service officially began at the election because the seat was vacant, House Historian Robert V. Remini said.

Murtha surpassed Republican Joseph McDade of Scranton, who retired in 1999 after 18 terms.

Supporters described Murtha as a champion for the 12th District's residents and communities, a recognized expert on military issues and a leader behind the scenes. Murtha came under fire in recent years as the "King of Pork" for using his leadership position on the Defense Appropriations Committee to create allocations critics say are directed to projects that attract votes or reward campaign contributors.

Business leaders counter that the earmarks helped enable businesses to establish themselves, provided infrastructure and helped diversify the economy following the

devastating loss of steel and coal industries. As those businesses have grown, they are able to become competitive and self-sustaining.

“He would bring people together,” said Linda Thomson, president of Johnstown Area Regional Industries. “Mr. Murtha was constantly tuned in to the opportunities of the region – what was made here; what was capable of being made here. He would have the vision and we would implement that vision.”

“He created the inertia to do great things here,” said Ed Sheehan Jr., president and chief executive officer of Concurrent Technologies Corp.

Although his Defense position brought benefits to the region, Murtha was recognized as a champion for the military and expert in the field.

“Jack has become the guy who knows more about defense than anybody in Congress,” Rep. Mike Doyle, D-Allegheny County, said in a recent interview. “He has distinguished himself as the go-to person whether it’s military operations or policy.”

Murtha’s commitment to serving his country began early. During one of his last interviews, he said he dreamed of military and government service when he was a boy. “I remember when I was a kid, I wanted to be in the Marine Corps and I wanted to be in Congress,” Murtha said on Jan. 27.

He dropped out of prestigious Washington and Jefferson College in 1952 to enlist in the Marine Corps as a private to go to Korea, and later volunteered for duty in Vietnam as an officer in the Marine Corps Reserve. He earned a Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts for injuries related to enemy fire.

He later graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a degree in economics. A student of history, Murtha said he was influenced by World War I veterans he knew growing up in western Pennsylvania and by his father and uncles who served in World War II. His brothers also joined the Marines, carrying on a family tradition of military service that dates back to his mother’s ancestors, Robert Bell in the Revolutionary War and Abraham Tidball Bell, a Union soldier in the Civil War.

Through the years he has led congressional diplomatic and investigative committees in such places as El Salvador, Panama, Cambodia, Iraq and Afghanistan. Criticism directed at Murtha intensified after he began speaking against the Bush administration’s Iraq war policy in 2005, but Murtha said his criticism was proven valid, and a colleague agreed.

Murtha’s hands-on approach to serving the district gained him attention following the 1977 Johnstown Flood, where he spent countless hours meeting with recovery workers and local leaders, coordinating operations.

“We didn’t have any legislation that allowed federal money to be spent,” Murtha said last

month. “One time I left Johns-town to talk to President Carter to say, we need to pass legislation. Within a week, (then House Speaker) Tip O’Neil had passed legislation, the Senate had passed it, the president had signed it.

“We spent \$350 million fixing up public buildings and sewer and water and the electrical systems. We had a coordinated effort. There was not a scintilla of scandal because we made damn sure.”

Ed Cernic Sr. of West Taylor Township recalled the congressman’s help during the aftermath of the flood of 1977.

“He got the helicopters to look for bodies down the Conemaugh River,” Cernic said. “He brought in a lot of money for the recovery, and he was instrumental in the HUD trailers that were brought in for the victims.”

That personal approach and ability to accomplish goals made Murtha a valuable leader, but his genuine compassion brought him close to those who worked with him on all levels, said Tom Kurtz, president and chief executive officer of Windber Research Institute.

“He was quite a guy,” Kurtz said. “We will miss him not only for his support and encouragement, but he was just a friend to all of us.”

Like many who interacted with the congressman, Kurtz said the two developed a strong personal connection.

“There are only a few people who come into your life and touch your life in that way,” Kurtz said. “I haven’t felt this bad since I lost my father-in-law and my own father.” Survivors include his wife, Joyce, of 54 years; daughter, Donna Murtha; son, John Murtha and his wife Kathy; son, Patrick Murtha and his wife Lynn; grandchildren Jack, Anne and Clayton.

Funeral arrangements are still being planned, said Frank Duca of Frank Duca Funeral Home, 119 Jackson St.

Local visitation and services will be held at a location to be determined. Another memorial service will be held in the

U.S. Capitol sometime after Murtha’s burial at Arlington National Ceremony. Arrangements have been delayed because of transportation issues around Washington due to the weekend storm.

In lieu of flowers, the Murtha family suggests contributions to UPMC John P. Murtha Cancer Pavilion in Johnstown or Joyce Murtha Breast Care Center in Windber.