

WORLD WAR II

# Montford Point Marines: Honoring and Preserving Their Legacy



Allowed to serve in the Corps beginning in June 1942, the African-American Marines were "all ready on the firing line," and began to fill the 51st Defense Bn, which deployed to war in January 1944. (USMC photo)

*"The first black Marines went to Montford Point to prove patriotism is color blind."*

—LTGen Walter Gaskin Sr., 24 July 2010,  
at the National Montford Point  
Marine Association Ball, Fredericksburg, Va.  
LTGen Gaskin is the first African-American Marine  
infantry officer to be promoted to his rank.  
He currently is Deputy Chairman,  
NATO Military Committee.

By Coral Anika Theill

**T**he Montford Point Marines often are honored as important figures and role models in American history because they willingly fought to protect a nation that did not offer them basic civil rights. African-American men were willing to give their lives for their country at a time when they still were subjected to lynching and racism in their communities, without the protection of our government.

The battle that took place from 1939 to 1945 for world freedom has been referred to as America's war. But while American troops fought the horror of World War II, the Montford Point Marines fought a second battle—one for equal treatment.

Like the Army, Air Force and Navy, today's Marine Corps is fully integrated, but for generations the Marines did not admit African-Americans. The racial integration of the American military was a lengthy process that started in 1941. The

Marine Corps today contains many successful African-American members and leaders, who trace their lineage to the group known as the "Montford Pointers."

The early days of WW II were difficult and demanding on the U.S. military, but it was impossible for African-Americans to join the Marine Corps. First lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune understood these problems and worked together for racial justice and gender equality.

Mary McLeod Bethune gained national recognition in 1936 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed her director of the Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration, making her the first African-American woman to become a federal agency head.

The United States had not yet become involved in the horror gripping Europe and the Pacific, but the times were tense. It was against this backdrop, at the urging of his wife, Eleanor, and threatened with a march on Washington by the president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and civil rights activist, A. Philip Randolph, that on 25 June 1941, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802, establishing the Fair Employment Practices Commission.

The order banned racial discrimination in any defense industry receiving federal contracts. Order 8802 declared: "There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin."

The order was not immediately popular at the Marine Corps headquarters. Major General Commandant Thomas Holcomb, in testimony before the General Board of the Navy on 23 Jan. 1942, indicated that it had long been his considered opinion that "there would be a definite loss of efficiency in the Marine Corps if we have to take Negroes."

Commandant Holcomb once publicly stated that given the choice between having a Marine Corps of 5,000 whites or 500,000 blacks he would much rather have the whites. Despite the Commandant's private protests, the pressure was on from the White House and from other public sources to proceed with the enlistment of blacks for general duty in the Navy and Marine Corps.

On 7 April 1942, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox announced that the Navy, Coast Guard and Marine Corps soon would allow African-Americans to enlist. Brigadier General Keller E. Rockey, director of Plans and Policy for Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, recommended that African-Americans be assigned to composite defense battalions. These battalions included a company of infantry.

Later, it was specified that 900 African-American recruits would become members of the Corps' 51st Composite Defense Battalion.

### African-Americans for the Corps

Recruiting for the "Montford Marines" began on 1 June 1942. Thousands of African-American men from all across America, eager to serve, flocked to recruiting offices. These new recruits were not sent to the traditional boot camps of Parris Island, S.C., and San Diego. They would undergo basic training at Montford Point, a segregated facility at Camp Lejeune, N.C. By 1945, there were 19,168 enlisted African-American men.

Cpl Arvin L. "Tony" Ghazlo gives unarmed combat instruction to Pvt Ernest C. Jones at Montford Point Camp, April 1943.



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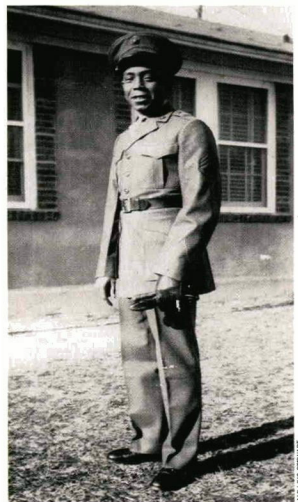
Above: The 51st Defense Bn leathernecks also trained with the .50-cal. heavy machine gun in its antiaircraft role.

Right: SSgt James E. Stewart Sr. was manager of the Montford Point Hostess House, temporary lodging at Montford Point Camp, MCB Camp Lejeune, N.C., in 1944.

The service record book and the enlistment contract were stamped with the word "COLORED." The African-American recruits all were given the rank of "private." College degrees or positions as doctors or lawyers made no impact.

Many Montford Point Marines felt the unfair treatment wasn't so much on the part of the Corps as it was from the citizens. Local business owners frequently treated the Montford Point Marines as second-class citizens and denied them service in restaurants.

Some Montford Point Marines were arrested and charged with impersonating a Marine, as police officers had never seen an African-American Marine. While trav-



MAX LOOS STEWART





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A 90 mm anti-aircraft gun crew of the 51st Defense Battalion trains for overseas deployment.

## African-American Marines Timeline

- 1942: Alfred Masters, first enlisted African-American Marine
- 1943: Privates First Class Charles E. Allen, Arnold R. Bostick, Mortimer A. Cox, Edgar R. Davis Jr., Edgar R. Huff and Gilbert "Hashmark" Johnson, first African-American Montford Point drill instructors
- 1944: SgtMaj Charles Anderson, first African-American sergeant major at Montford Point
- 1945: 2dLt Frederick Branch, first African-American officer
- 1949: Annie N. Graham, first African-American woman enlisted
- 1952: LtGen Frank E. Petersen Jr., first African-American to become general and first black aviator, commissioned
- 1955: SgtMaj Edgar R. Huff, first African-American sergeant major after integration
- 1965: First Montford Point Marine Association Meeting, in Philadelphia
- 1968: Annie L. Grimes, first African-American woman commissioned as chief warrant officer
- 1974: Two years after Gilbert H. Johnson's death from a heart attack, the Montford Point facility at Camp Lejeune, N.C., was renamed Camp Gilbert H. Johnson, the first military installation to be named after an African-American.
- 2001: Opening of the Montford Point Marines National Museum

### African-American Marines who have been awarded the Medal of Honor:

- Private First Class James Anderson Jr., 1967
- Sergeant Rodney Maxwell Davis, 1967
- PFC Ralph Henry Johnson, 1968
- PFC Oscar Palmer Austin, 1969
- PFC Robert Henry Jenkins, 1969

—Coral Anika Theill

eling to Camp Lejeune by train, they were segregated and often could not purchase food and beverage.

Moreover, bus lines made travel difficult for the Montford Point Marines who were on leave. Bus drivers gave priority to white passengers, as state law required, which left the African-American Marines without transportation as their deadline for return to the camp drew near. Colonel Samuel L. Woods Jr., who established the Montford Point Camp and also served as the first commanding officer of the 51st Composite Defense Bn, took steps to ensure that African-American Marines could return safely to Camp Lejeune by assigning his motor transport to pick up the Montford Point Marines in Jacksonville, N.C.

By mid-1943, all drill instructors and all noncommissioned officers at Montford Point were black. Veterans said many of the black drill instructors were meaner than the white DIs were. Approximately 20,000 African-American men trained at the camp.

The African-Americans who reported for training at Montford Point knew that service might require fighting and dying for their country. Many indignities were endured in pursuit of their ultimate goal—becoming U.S. Marines. In the beginning, racism frequently raised its ugly head, increasing the challenges for the Montford Point Marines.

Because they were assigned to depot and ammo companies, the Montford Point Marine recruits were given manual labor jobs, such as transporters for motor vehicles, ammunition carriers, stewards in dining facilities and supply ship stevedores, loading and unloading ships.

### 51st and 52d Defense Battalions

The 51st and 52d Defense Bns (1942-46) were the first two defense battalions commanded by white officers, but organized from among African-American Marines who had trained at Montford Point.

The Montford Point Marines trained hard, had a strong sense of loyalty and honor and were eager to prove that they were ready to fight. The Montford Point Marines saw action and service on the Mariana Islands, Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Peleliu, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, Japan and China.

After hearing of the heroism of the African-American enlisted men, Lieutenant General Alexander A. Vandegrift, Commandant of the Marine Corps, announced, "The Negro Marines are no longer on trial. They are Marines, period." However, there were not many mainstream publications that reported on the courage and bravery of the African-American Marines. Even now, not enough is known

about the heroic actions of those men.

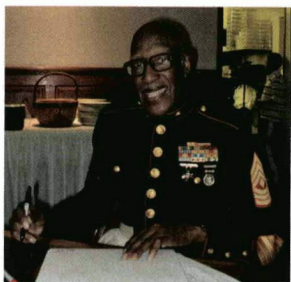
On the battlefield, Marines fought together for a common cause without segregation. When the troops returned to America, they returned to the rules of segregation. The lessons the Marines had taught each other on the battlefield would become the seeds of change in the pre-Civil Rights era, which would begin to transform our society.

It is through the side-by-side, firsthand experiences in war that black Marines and white Marines became "green" Marines. The conditions of war forced men to look at their similarities instead of their differences. They were Americans first, fighting for their country.

The structure of the military is a great equalizer and teaches people to rely on each other for survival. When you depend on someone else for your life, you forget about color, race and religion. All you can remember is that they were there for you and they saved your life. When you have been through hell and back, you think about a man's character, not his skin color. These conditions are missing in the civilian-life experience.

Many of the Marines who served together in the war went back to the States as changed men. War is hell, but from that hell the transformation that was needed in America began. The military was the first institution to become completely integrated. In time, civilian institutions began to follow its example.

General James T. Conway, 34th Commandant, said in a 26 Aug. 2010, speech at the Montford Point Marines' Day ceremony at Camp Johnson, N.C.: "We all know it [segregation] didn't end there, but it was the beginning of the end of segregation in our country. The Montford



CORAL ANIKA THEILL

Point Marines, the Tuskegee Airmen and others had, through their courage, persistence and performance, done more in four years to advance the cause of equality than had been accomplished by the whole of society during the previous 75 years.

"In 1948, President [Harry S.] Truman declared desegregation of the military. By 1964, the civil rights acts, proposed by President [Lyndon B.] Johnson, did the same across the country. Still, it has taken decades to get it right: decades of education, training and trust to build the critical mass, earn the confidence and select the leadership."

**Dedication of Iwo Jima Cemetery**  
At the dedication of the cemetery on Iwo Jima in 1945, Chaplain Roland B. Gittlesohn gave a sermon called "The

Purest Democracy." The words he spoke on those beaches should be remembered and lived by us all now. He said: "We dedicate ourselves, first, to live together in peace the way they fought and are buried in war. Here lie officers and men, Negroes and whites, rich men and poor ... together. Here are Protestants, Catholics, and Jews ... together. Here no man prefers another because of his faith or despises him because of his color. Among these men there is no discrimination. No prejudice. No hatred. There is the highest and purest democracy."

### Moving Forward

The Montford Point Marines were diligent in their duties. They fought with courage, served honorably and won the respect of those who served with them. The African-American Marines accomplished everything that was expected and asked of them. They helped to change history by demonstrating racial harmony on the chaotic beaches and battlefields around the world. Many of the Montford Point Marines would help influence the Civil Rights movement that was to come.

On 26 July 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981. Seven years after President Roosevelt's order to allow blacks into all services, this order ended segregation within the military.

*Editor's note: Coral Anika Theill is an author and advocate whose published works address trauma recovery and healing from post-traumatic stress disorder and, most recently, wounded Marines, the Warrior Games and Montford Point Marines.*



Below left: Gen James T. Conway, 34th Commandant, talks to Montford Point Marines and guests at the 26 Aug. 2010 Montford Point Marines' Day.

Below right: Montford Point was renamed Camp Johnson in honor of Sgt Gilbert H. "Hashmark" Johnson (left), one of the first African-American DIs.



CPA LEVIN WIKI COMMONS



USMC