

The National Museum of the Marine Corps

World War II and the Origins of Diversity

By Owen L. Conner and Charles Grow

On 1 May 1944, Gunnery Sergeant Perry Fischer reported to the 8th Marine Ammunition Company at Montford Point, New River, N.C. Young and confident, Fischer exhibited the spirit of many Marines of the “greatest generation.” Born into a Jewish family on the tough streets of Chicago, he loved the Marine Corps and had excelled during his brief career. He had risen steadily through the ranks within four short years. In the process, GySgt Fischer had acquired a reputation for being tough, fit and fair with all of his Marines.

However, serving in administrative and ceremonial duties in Washington, D.C., was not what he had wanted. Like many Marines, Fischer yearned to do his part and be closer to the fighting.

With no previous knowledge of the unit to which he had been assigned, GySgt Fischer could not conceal his surprise upon arrival at Montford Point. Black Marines marching up and down the parade ground outside his new command was almost the last thing he expected to see. He wondered aloud to his fellow white enlisted staff if he was being punished for an indiscretion of which he was unaware. Most of them had wondered the

same thing. Until their new assignment, the majority of them were not even aware that African-Americans were allowed to join the Marine Corps. It seemed impossible to many that black and white Marines could work efficiently together, let alone prepare for the rigors of warfare in the Pacific.

At the start, tensions within the 8th Marine Ammunition Co were high. Black noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who had led their men through basic training had to stand by silently until they could ascertain the degree of authority their new white superiors would allow them. White staff, both NCO and officer alike, with varying levels of conviction, made mistakes in attempting to gain their men’s trust. Slowly but surely, however, men like Fischer and the rest of the unit began to embrace the Marine Corps’ unifying spirit of discipline and pride. Despite fears from both sides, the Marines at the small-unit level started to see beyond racial differences and recognized each other as comrades in a common cause. Their duty, not their color, came to be what truly mattered.

mitment, accomplishments and sacrifices of all Marines.

In order to appreciate better the diversity accomplishments of the Marine Corps today, we have to look historically at how we began such integration. Through current exhibits and future enhancements to the World War II gallery, which will occur during the next three years, the National Museum of the Marine Corps, located in Triangle, Va., near the Quantico Marine base, is dedicated to presenting the history of diversity.

Examining the legacy of the Montford Point Marines within the rich history of

Exhibiting the Story of Diversity

Since opening its doors on 10 Nov. 2006, the National Museum of the Marine Corps’ mission has been to honor the com-



Col Julia Hamblet



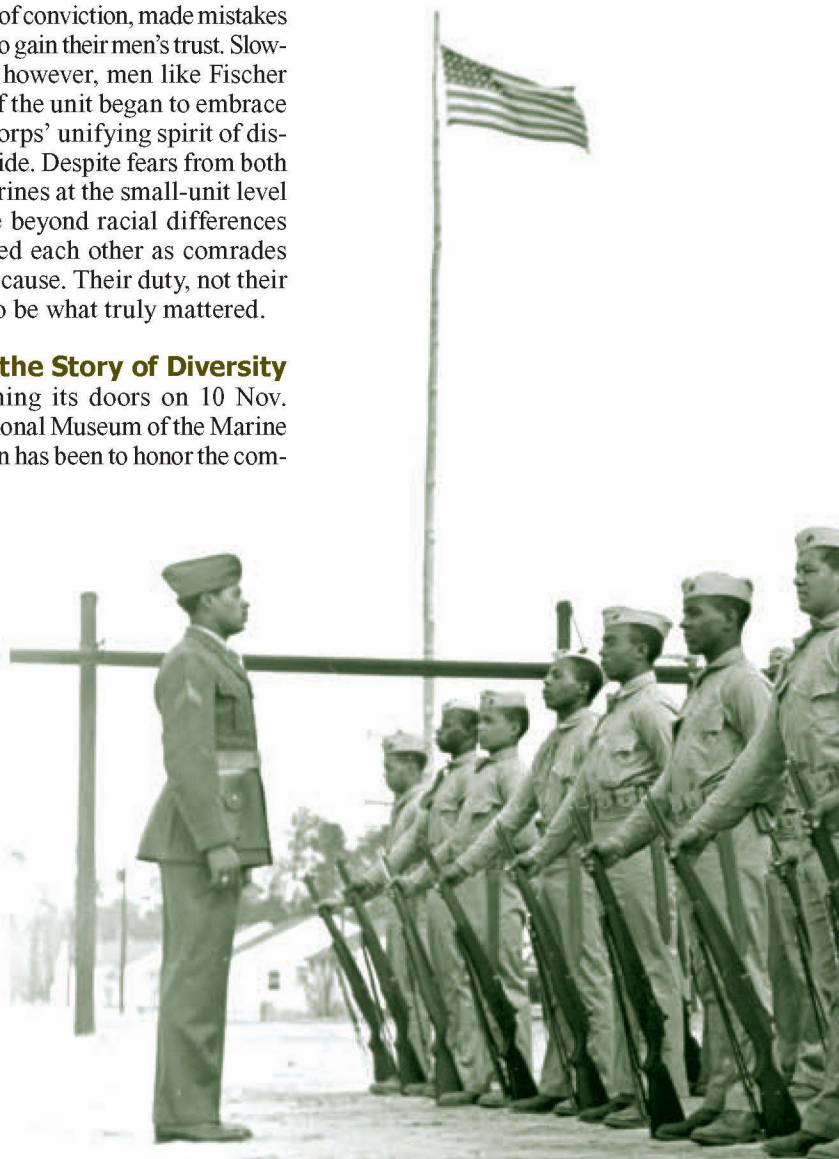
PFC Harold Gonsalves



GySgt Perry Fischer



LtGen Pedro del Valle



WW II provides inspiration and a greater understanding of the path our country took to diversity. The honoring of WW II black Marines with the Congressional Gold Medal and the interest expressed in their history by the Commandant, General James F. Amos, has served to highlight how the military led social and cultural integration within the wider American experience. The museum proudly assists that effort by highlighting not only the great battles and figures of Marine Corps history, but the key moments (both high and low) of the men and women who helped build the present-day Corps.

While touring the museum's WW II gallery, visitors become immersed in the Marine Corps' greatest military struggles and victories. The inspiring narrative focuses primarily on the Pacific War, but there are many other inspirational stories to tell. In the coming year, new artifacts are planned for display that will recognize prominent Montford Point Marines. Enhanced interactive exhibits will highlight rarely seen archive images of black Marines during the war. A selection of com-



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE MARINE CORPS

Cpl Edna Juan-Wells served at the Marine Corps Motor Transport School at MCB Camp Lejeune, N.C., in 1944.

PELLING oral histories will educate museum visitors about how an all-white, all-male Marine Corps entered America's greatest war and emerged socially and culturally transformed—beginning to resemble the Marine Corps of today.

Starting with wartime expansion and

the Corps' first significant acceptance of African-American Marines, the museum's exhibits will explore the genesis and tribulations involved in the progression of African-American recruits, from the humble origins of segregated life at Montford Point to the battlefields of Saipan and Iwo Jima. African-American Marines originally were assigned to ammunition and supply units as a means of enforcing segregation, and a planned museum exhibit will highlight the significant contributions they made to those support units and their valor in combat.

Current story lines commemorate the important contributions of the Women Marine Reserve to the war effort. The planned addition of an American Samoan Marine defense battalion uniform will highlight the unique service of Pacific Islanders. Additional enhancements to the Iwo Jima and Okinawa exhibits also will note the important strides made within the Corps for Marines of Hispanic heritage and the service of Native Americans in WW II.

While the level of individual achieve-

Black Marine recruits fall out for inspection at Montford Point, New River, N.C. (USMC photo)



ments and struggles may have varied in light of the enormous size and scope of WW II, the history of those Marine diversity pioneers is a vital and inspirational story.

Wartime Expansion and the Pioneers of Change

Muster and payrolls from the Revolutionary War indicate at least three black Americans served in the Continental Marines. Their brief efforts in pioneering diversity quickly were lost to the past. On 25 May 1942, the Commandant of the Marine Corps first issued formal instructions to recruit “colored male citizens,” and the course of history was altered significantly.

The Commandant’s order came with reservations. In March 1943, Classified Letter of Instruction No. 421 stated in stark terms the types of challenges facing black Marines. Clearly showing they would not be accepted as equals, the order bluntly stated that “in no case shall there be colored noncommissioned officers senior to enlisted men in the same unit.” The Commandant’s previous declarations that blacks were “trying to break into a club that doesn’t want them,” and his preference that they “satisfy [their] aspirations for combat in the Army,” left little doubt about the official attitude of the Marine Corps.

Confronted with the prevalent mindset of the era, the black Marines of Montford Point found inspiration and solidarity within their own ranks. Aply led by a hastily assembled cadre of noncommissioned officers such as Edgar R. Huff and Gilbert H. Johnson, they persevered in

the face of internal and external prejudice.

In the 1993 book “Blacks and Whites: Together Through Hell,” author Perry Fischer (with co-author Master Gunnery Sergeant Brooks Gray) documents his wartime experiences and how he learned to take great pride in being selected to lead black Marines with the 8th Marine Ammunition Co. As one of only 144 white Marine noncommissioned officers selected



A “cruise book” was produced for the black Marines at Montford Point in 1943.

from the entire Marine Corps to lead black Marines, Fischer learned to see the potential in his assignment and men. When viewed in the difficult context of the time, their book is a remarkable inspiration.

Camaraderie at the unit level would serve the segregated Ammunition and Depot Co Marines well in the Pacific. Intended to serve as a source of labor, but

never in direct combat, the realities of the war in the Pacific proved otherwise for black Marines. The units saw action at Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Peleliu, Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and they served with pride and valor both in combat and support roles. Accepted reluctantly under the needs of wartime expansion, each of the four black Marine companies present at Iwo Jima was cited for exceptional bravery and service under fire.

Black Marines, however, were not the only pioneers of diversity in WW II. With the need for additional manpower came the creation of the Women Marine Reserve. In 1918, a small number of women had been allowed to serve in clerical duties in the Marine Corps. The role of women in WW II, however, would be significantly enhanced. Established in February 1943, the organization freed nearly 20,000 men to fight. In contrast to the limited duties of WW I, women Marines served in approximately 225 specialties and filled 85 percent of the enlisted duties at Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps by war’s end.

They were led by pioneers such as Colonel Julia Hamblet. Among the first to enter the ranks of the Women Marine Reserve in 1943, Hamblet had an impressive career spanning 22 years. When she retired in 1965, she had served two times as the Director of Women Marines. Like black Marines, women Marines rose above the questioning at the highest levels of their service and were forerunners of the Marine Corps of today.

Perceptions of ethnicity in the Marine Corps during WW II also changed. Interspersed among white units, Marines of



Gilbert H. “Hashmark” Johnson had served in the Army and the Navy when he joined the Corps in late 1942. He became a DI as a PFC and was a recruit first sergeant at Montford Point in 1943.



GySgt Edgar Huff also was at Montford Point. Huff was the III Marine Amphibious Force sergeant major in Vietnam during 1970-71.



The training at Montford Point served the Marines and the Corps well in the Pacific campaigns of WW II. (USMC photo)



Above: As a corporal, Edgar Huff (center, bottom row) was the drill instructor for these black recruits at Montford Point.

Right: The Corps WW II diversity included Samoans of the 1st Samoan Bn, recruited to help defend American Samoa.

Hispanic heritage fought in every major battle in the Pacific theater. Among their greatest stories was that of Medal of Honor Marine Private First Class Harold Gonsalves. A hardened Marine veteran at the age of 19, PFC Gonsalves sacrificed his life for his fellow Marines when he flung himself on an enemy grenade during the Battle of Okinawa.

At the higher levels of command, Pedro del Valle became the first Hispanic-American general in the Marine Corps in 1942. A distinguished combat officer at Guadalcanal and Guam, Lieutenant General del Valle was awarded the Navy Distinguished Service Medal in recognition of his leadership as the commanding general of the First Marine Division during the Battle of Okinawa.

The Marine Corps Today and the Museum Tomorrow

From the beginning, the Marine Corps' story has been one of transformations. From a small force of shipborne detachments to the modern-day Marine expeditionary units, the mission and scope of the Corps constantly is evolving. While

Marines of every era enjoy a sense of continuity and camaraderie in their title, the concepts of those who were allowed to enter this realm have changed.

Today, the United States Marine Corps is composed of men and women of every place and creed and is representative of the diversity of the American people. Considering the Marine Corps' pre-1942 segregated history and the demographics of minorities and women proudly serving today, this is an amazing accomplishment: one that makes a strong argument for the U.S. Armed Forces as the true "melting pot" of American society.

Author's note: Here is a tremendous link to even more information on the Montford Point Marines: www.jdnews.com/articles/montford-95116-point-marines.html. Its author, Dr. Gina Francis, DVM, is the daughter of the late Montford Point Marine Glenn White and a life member of the Montford Point Marine Association Ladies Auxiliary.

As the WW II generation passes on, there is a risk of their history being lost. If you have artifacts, photos or papers you



would like to preserve within your family or donate to the museum, to learn how, visit the National Museum of the Marine Corps' website at www.usmcmuseum.com.

Editor's note: Owen Conner is a Uniforms and Heraldry curator at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, specializing in World War II history. Charles Grow is a retired Marine captain and combat artist and currently is the deputy director of the National Museum of the Marine Corps.

