

MONTFORD POINT MARINE ASSOCIATION

Remarks by General James F. Amos at the Montford Point Marines Association National Convention on July 30, 2011

Good evening ladies and gentlemen... my wife Bonnie and I are honored to be among you tonight in this great American city. We are here this evening to recognize the 46th anniversary of the Montford Point Marine Association...an organization whose legacy and service to our nation is of immense importance to the history and fabric of our Corps.

This year also marks the 69th anniversary of the first African-Americans who entered our Corps at Montford Point, NC. While some of these men chose to be pioneers by enlisting, others joined to serve their country. Collectively, they established a tradition of sacrifice and duty that continues today in the thousands of black Marine officers and enlisted — men and women alike — who wear the Eagle, Globe and Anchor.

Today our Corps is more diverse than at any time in our history. At stations and bases here in the U.S. and overseas ... at sea onboard amphibious ships ... and in combat zones such as the Helmand Province of Afghanistan, African American Marines serve with distinction and honor.

I want to thank the many honored guests, elected officials, general officers, and Marines who made their way to Atlanta for the annual convention and this evening's events.

Every year the Montford Point Marine Association does a fabulous job with its convention, and this year is no exception. I think it's a testament to the leadership of the National President, CWO4 James Averhart ...who still wears the uniform of an active duty Marine, and the countless others on the Montford Point Board.

Ladies and Gentlemen...please join me in a round of applause for those who worked so faithfully to make tonight's event a reality.

A little over two weeks ago, we honored the pioneering Black generals, admirals and Senior Executive Service officials of the Department of the Navy at the Pentagon. It was a wonderful Tribute to African-American Leadership.

Many of you in the audience tonight were there that morning. Afterwards we ceremonially cut the ribbon on a marvelous display that now permanently resides on the fourth deck of the Pentagon's - A - Ring.

As I sat on the stage that day, I looked out into the audience and reflected on the past seven decades...I thought of where we've been...and where we're headed.

I was reminded of the many successes of our Marine Corps Senior Leaders assembled there that warm morning...all of whom I count as friends. Names such as: MGen Charlie Bolden, now the Director of NASA and a former Space Shuttle

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Commander; MGen Cliff Stanley, currently serving as an Under Secretary of Defense in the Pentagon; LtGen Frank Petersen, the first Black Marine aviator and first black general officer in our Corps...talk about a pioneer;

MGen Gary Cooper, former Assistant Secretary of the Air Force and Ambassador to Jamaica, and the first African-American to command an infantry unit in combat; Lieutenant General Walt Gaskin, the Deputy Chairman to NATO's military committee, former Cmdr of all Marine forces in Iraq, and the first Black officer to command a Marine division; LtGen Willie Williams, the chief of the Marine Corps staff...a good friend...and one of the finest officers I know; and lastly, Major General Ron Bailey, the current Commanding General of the Blue Diamond ...the mighty 1st Marine Division. These men, all of them general officers, owe a measure of their many successes to the legacy of those who went through Montford Point.

During the tribute ceremony, Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus described the Navy's "Golden 13," the first African-Americans to attend Naval Recruit Officers Training. They made me think about the Marine Corps' own trailblazers. Officers like Frederick C. Branch, the first Black officer in our Corps, who prior to completing OCS, had been a graduate of Montford Point.

Similar to the Navy's "Golden 13" ... the Marine Corps had special men about whom many of you may not know, but whose legacy is as equally important to the rich history of African-Americans in service to Country and its Corps of Marines.

During the Revolutionary War there were thirteen Black men who served in the Continental Marines.

While we can find the names of only a few, one of them ... Isaac Walker ... was recruited by none other than our first Marine recruiter - Robert Mullan. Captain Mullan was one of the founding officers of the Continental Marines. His family ran Tun Tavern, the famous public house and restaurant in colonial Philadelphia recognized by all Marines today as the birthplace of our Corps.

Turn the clock forward with me to 1941, it's then that President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802, establishing the Fair Employment Practices Commission ...thus opening all services to Blacks.

Similar to Isaac Walker during the Revolutionary War, a new crop of daring men stepped forth in the modern era leaving their families and their communities across America to join in World War II's struggle.

Men came from the north and south...from all walks of life. They came for different reasons...some wanted the challenge of being a Marine...some wanted to earn a living...but all came to protect and to serve their country honorably! Men like "Hashmark" Johnson...John Pridgen...and George Jackson had prior service in the

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military, they simply wanted to be a U.S. Marine. Others like Charles Anderson and Charles Simmons were college graduates.

Some of them had never experienced segregation before...they didn't believe what they'd heard until they experienced it at places like Union Station in Washington DC, or at the bus station on the way to Jacksonville, NC. Others discovered that some levels of discrimination went away with the Marine uniform when white Marines stood by their side to get them a seat on a bus or food at a restaurant.

But all of them had one thing in common about their entry and training into the Marine Corps...they all went through Montford Point...it was the beginning...and it was hard.

On a rugged and heavily forested 5 ½ acre site they underwent training at a camp made of wooden huts. They braved a variety of threats...everything from the swagger sticks of tough drill instructors to the snakes, bears and mosquitoes that inhabited the land.

Like white recruits who were in training at Parris Island and San Diego...many of the first black recruits who came to Montford Point arrived with skills they'd learned in the trades...some had college. They were looked upon to build the camps and be trained as drill instructors for follow-on groups and classes.

They were challenged harder than their white counterparts who joined the Corps in the 40's. They became the first legends of Montford Point. Their names included Edgar Huff... "Hashmark" Johnson...and Tony Ghazlo.

For seven years, from 1942 to 1949, 20K' young black men departed Montford Point as Marines.

Their story and struggle for equality and acceptance in the Corps did not end when they left Montford Point...it had just begun. They weren't allowed to become infantrymen or to serve in other mainstream military occupational specialties. Rather, most were assigned to the segregated 51st and 52nd Defense Battalions or reported for duty in steward units to serve meals to white officers.

The two defense battalions were largely gun batteries and anti-aircraft artillery outfits. Although skilled in their gunnery and well led, these two defense battalions largely saw no action in the Marshall Islands and on Guam where they were employed in the Pacific Theater—decisions that greatly disappointed the Marine's who were imbued with our warrior ethos.

It's ironic, but the Marines from Montford Point who saw the most action in World War II were those assigned to segregated ammunition and depot companies...units whose jobs were to speed supplies to front-line units engaged in combat with the Japanese during the island hopping campaign. To resupply the front lines, these men

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often had to fight their way to the front, and then carry back wounded white Marines to the rear for medical care. The Marines of Montford Point demonstrated their mettle during vicious and bloody fighting in places like Saipan and Okinawa. Their courage under fire and fidelity to their fellow Marines, regardless of skin color, began to erode the cruel and false generational stereotype within the Corps that blacks could not, and would not, fight in the face of danger. In 1944, General Alexander Vandegrift, then Commandant, MOH recipient and hero of Guadalcanal, who had observed the courage of black Marines in hand-to-hand combat on the island of Saipan said... ***“The experiment with the negro Marines is over. They are Marines ...Period!!!”***

The close of World War II and the dawning of integration within the services during the 50's, saw African-American Marines serving alongside, and in some cases in charge of white Marines ... their courage now unquestioned...they were being awarded Silver Stars, Bronze Stars and Navy Crosses for combat valor in Korea at Pusan and elsewhere.

In Vietnam there was no shortage of heroic acts...in fact five Medals of Honor were awarded to African-American men...all of them for selfless acts to save others lives...not just black lives...or white lives ...but Marine lives.

The stories of the Marines from Montford Point are clearly some of the richest history of our Corps...a legacy handed down through generations that has been woven into the fabric and the soul of our Corps...a legacy that has earned its rightful place in our storied 236 year history.

To that end, I want to mention a couple of the initiatives that we have started at Headquarters Marine Corps.

First, I am reviewing the books on the story and struggle of the Montford Point Marines. Ones like “The Marines of Montford Point” by Melton McLaurin. By next month's anniversary of Montford Point, I will add the very best of these books to the Commandant's Reading List. These books will be a must-read for young Marines of all backgrounds.

Also, on August 26th at Marine Barracks Washington DC...the 69th anniversary of the first recruits arriving at Montford Point, we are rolling out the red carpet for those who trained and became Marines on that hallowed ground. We have a weekend of recognition and grand events planned, capstoned by the legendary Evening Parade at 8th and I, where these iconic men will be our Official Guests of Honor.

I ask that all Marines who went through Montford Point to stand ... if you can... and be recognized with a round of applause ... Thank you

These Montford Pointers, and the ones who have passed, are as equally important to the history of the Marine Corps as the Tuskegee Airmen are to the Air Force and the Buffalo Soldiers are to the Army. As such, we are working aggressively with legislators

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on Capitol Hill to confer the Congressional Gold Medal this year on the Montford Point Marines for their service to the United States from World War II to the Vietnam Era, forever anchoring their role in the history of our great Nation.

Representative Corrine Brown of Florida has recently introduced a bill in the House, and Senator Kay Hagan from NC intends to introduce a companion bill in the Senate this upcoming week.

While they are providing staunch support to this award...I need your help to urge all legislators in Washington to move quickly in making this Congressional Gold Medal a reality. It's long overdue...we need to quit admiring this oversight and make this happen!!!!!!!!!!!!

Additionally ... and this is important ... we are going to anchor the rich history of Montford Point at our entry level training facilities and through our resident and non-resident schools. Every Marine ... from Private to General ... will know the history of those men who crossed the threshold to fight not only the enemy they were soon to know overseas, but the enemy of racism and segregation in their own country.

Finally, we are creating a video that will document the story of the Marines of Montford Point. This will be a lasting tribute to remember the almost 20K' Marines who went through Montford Point.

The Marine Corps is better today because of the legacy of service of African-Americans ... from those who served in the Revolutionary War ... to the Marines of Montford Point ... to those forward deployed and engaged right now in the toughest part of Afghanistan.

We honor the men of Montford Point who won acclaim on the islands of the Pacific, and those who fought so valiantly in Korea and in the jungles of Vietnam.

My promise to you this evening is that your story will not be forgotten...it will take its rightful place and will be forever anchored in the rich history of our Corps.

Thank you and Semper Fidelis.