

Press



Release

One of nation's first black Marines answered the call when a barrier was removed

by Amanda Thomas/Times-Georgian



Ann and James Pack in Smithfield, Michigan, after Pack received 'Marine of the Year' for 1988-1989 from the Michigan Marine Corps League.

Standing proudly in the display room of his Villa Rica home, World War II veteran James Pack points to several awards mounted on a wall, each honoring him for his military service as one of the first black Marines.

The award the Cleveland native is most proud of "Marine of the Year," which was awarded to him by the Michigan Marine Corps League for 1988-1989. But displayed just as prominently as his awards is a drawing by his grandchildren of a colorful locomotive that hangs just above a table where a scenic model of a railroad track and train sits.

"When we lived in Ohio, we weren't too far from the train and they used to run back and forth through Pittsburgh," Pack said while giving a brief history on passenger trains through the early 1930s. "I've always liked trains."

He has a clock in his living room that periodically fills the room with the sound of a train whistle. The 87-year-old Pack admits he does not spend as much time working on his train during the winter, but summer is another story.

"I stay all summer out here," said Pack with a smile that shows he is as passionate about trains as he is his military service, which would not have been possible if it was for a presidential order to allow blacks in the Marine Corps.

On June 25, 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 8802, establishing the fair employment practice that began to erase discrimination in the armed forces. Roosevelt established a presidential directive in 1942 giving blacks an opportunity to be recruited into the Marine Corps. Pack, who was 19 years old, enlisted on Nov. 3, 1943.

"I had a brother in the Navy and I had a brother in the Army so I wanted to be different so I picked the Marines," Pack said.

But they were not sent to the traditional boot camps of Parris Island, S.C., and San Diego, Calif. The recruits went through basic training at Montford Point, a facility at Camp Lejeune, N.C. Pack said many people did not want black Marines at the time.

“But Eleanor Roosevelt and A. Phillip Randolph went to [President] Roosevelt and told him, ‘You know, we got to get these blacks in the Marine Corps,’ and that’s what happened,” Pack said. “Without those two going to Franklin Roosevelt, it wouldn’t have happened.”

While blacks were allowed to enlist, they were segregated at Montford Point.

“All the officers were white and the drill instructors were black,” Pack said.

Drill instructors were white before he enlisted, but blacks eventually replaced whites as drill instructors. One of the first black DIs was late Sgt. Maj. Gilbert “Hasmark” Johnson. On April 19, 1974, Montford Point Camp was renamed Camp Johnson, in honor of Johnson. Pack described boot camp as “good and bad.”

Good because of the camaraderie among recruits and bad because of the discrimination they faced. When the first recruits arrived in 1942, they had to literally build their own base.

“They treated the black Marines like dogs,” said Pack’s stepdaughter, Ruth Langford. “They literally had to fight in order to serve their country. Instead of sending them to Parris Island like all the other Marines, they had to literally build their own base at Montford Point.”

Many people know about the Buffalo Soldiers and the Tuskegee Airmen, Langford said.

“They don’t know about the black Marines that served their country and served their country well,” she said. “They never got honored and they got called out their name all the time. Here you are serving your country, fighting for the freedom of Americans and you have to be called the n-word.”

Despite the discrimination they faced, Pack survived boot camp and went home on leave before returning to the base.

“But I never went out on liberty because it was the South and I knew how they treated black people,” he said.

Rather than risk getting in trouble, he opted to stay on base until he was shipped out.

“I grew up in Ohio and I wasn’t used to segregation,” Pack said.

After leaving Montford Point, he went to Norfolk, boarded a ship and traveled through the Panama Canal into Hawaii.

“We stayed there for a month or two; then we went to Maui and stayed there for a month or so,” Pack said.

The Marines then boarded the ship and head to their first invasion at Saipan on D-Day June 6, 1944. The black Marines were assigned to the two black defense battalions, the 51st and 52nd.

“The other black Marines were in depot companies and ammo companies,” Pack said. “I was in the [20th] depot company and our company were the first black Marines to see action in Saipan. In fact, we were with the 2nd and 4th Marine Division and some of us went in on the third wave on D-Day.”

When asked what it was like to see combat, Pack said, “You hope and pray that none of those bullets hit you.”

He described the experience as “terrible” because the captain’s orderly, Pvt. Kenneth J. Tibbs of Columbus, Ohio, was killed the first night on the beach. He was the first black Marine fatality as the result of enemy action in World War II.

“Until the island was secure, you dug you a hole and you stayed in there, especially at night,” Pack said. “They told you when night comes, stay put because if you don’t, you might lose your life.”

The black Marines stayed on Saipan for a while before going to Guam to load some ships. Because they were never told where they were going, the Marines did not know that the next ship they boarded would take them to the invasion on Okinawa in 1945. Pack described D-Day April 1 on Okinawa as “another terrible” battle because that is when the Japanese intensified their kamikaze missions.

One night, two Japanese planes landed on the airfield and his company was called into action.

“The sergeant told us, ‘All right everybody hit the deck, get your rifles, let’s go. We got to go to the airport and help out,’” Pack said.

But the armed forces already there took them down before his company arrived.

“Okinawa was kind of bad,” Pack said. “You don’t know what’s going to happen.”

They stayed on Okinawa until the bombing of Hiroshima.

“We were all packed and ready to invade Japan, but I got hurt on Okinawa,” said Pack.

They had a lot of free time while waiting to leave. “We were playing baseball and I slid into home plate. I got hurt.”

He would later learn he broke his ankle in three places, but when the sergeant checked on him, Pack gave him his own diagnosis.

“I said, ‘Don’t touch it. It’s broke,’” he said. “They put me on a jeep and took me up to the hospital. It was the aid station there.”

Pack’s outfit went on to China after the war ended.

“But they shipped me home,” he said. “I didn’t want to come home because I wanted to go to my outfit.”

The news was a disappointment because of the bonds he developed with his fellow Marines.

“After boot camp and all of that, you go overseas and you’re with these fellows for a couple of years,” Pack said. “You just feel like you’re a part of them and you don’t want to leave them.”

He earned promotions to the rank of corporal before honorably leaving the Marine Corps in 1946. His personal awards and decorations include World War II Victory Medal and the Good Conduct Medal. Although it was difficult serving as a Marine in a time of segregation, Pack does not regret his decision to enlist.

“Regardless of how rough it was, I don’t regret it at all,” he said.

When Pack came home, he had his leg in cast. But when he tried to explain to his family what happened, they did not believe him.

“Aw, you just lying,” Pack said of his family’s response. “I said, ‘All right.’”

In July of 1948 President Harry Truman issued Executive Order #9981 negating segregation. In September of 1949, Montford Marine Camp was deactivated, ending seven years of segregation. Twenty thousand black Marines received basic training there between 1942 and 1949.

In the summer of 1965, a group of Marine veterans living in Philadelphia developed plans to hold a national reunion of the Montford Pointers. In September, over four hundred former and active duty Marines, attended the reunion held in the Adelphia Hotel in downtown Philadelphia. The response led to the establishment of the Montford Point Marine Association, a non-profit veteran organization chartered in Philadelphia.

Pack received the “Semper Fidelis Award” from the Montford Point Marine Association in 1979. He has also been a longstanding and active member of the Marine Corps League and has held offices while a member of Montford Point Detachment in Detroit. He served as the detachment’s commandant from 1991 to 1993.

As a member of the Military Order of Devil Dogs (MODD – Pound #6), Pack received the “Pound Dog Robber” of the year for 2001 and “Dog” of the year. He moved to Georgia in 2003 to be closer to family. Now retired, Pack enjoys traveling and devotes time to the Disabled American Veterans.

He is currently paymaster for the Marine Corps League Aubrey Gilbert Detachment in Carrollton.

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