

Mr. Melvin Ballard

Melvin Ballard was born in Madison County on August 11, 1925. Mr. Ballard was the oldest of 12 children and father of one deceased son. Melvin Ballard who lived most of his life in or near Triana area served his country during World War II with dignity, honor and distinction as a United States Marine.

Corporal Melvin Ballard is preceded in death by his parents, William and Clara Moore Ballard; siblings, Cleveland Ballard, Moses Ballard, Caldonia Ballard, Arthur Ballard, Pearlle Ballard Hobbs and Rosie Ballard Malone; and son, Robert Ballard.

The U.S. Marine Corps refused to recruit African American and other minorities from its inception until 1942. With an Executive Order (#8802) from President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 25, 1941, the United States Marine Corps—the last all-white branch of the U.S. military—was forced to begin recruiting and enlisting African Americans. The first black recruits received basic training at the segregated Camp Montford Point, adjacent to camp Lejeune, near Jacksonville, North Carolina.

Corporal Melvin Ballard was one of those recruits from Madison County Alabama who was one of 20,000 African Americans trained at Camp Montford Point between 1942 and 1949. Melvin was only 18 years old when he was drafted to join the U.S. Marines during WWII. He was sent to Montford Pont Camp - a segregated basic-training facility for African American recruits - soon after to join the Marines' 51st Defense battalion. Corporal Ballard was specially trained in ammunition handling and sharp shooting before being deployed to the South Pacific.

Melvin Ballard, drafted in 1942, became one of America's first Black Marines to enlist in the U.S. Marines. Corporal Ballard served as a Marine from December 9, 1943 until May 14, 1946. The Montford Point Marines are often honored as important as figures and role models in American history because they willingly fought to protect a nation that still did not offer them basic civil rights. African American men were willing to give their lives for their country, without the protection of our government. The Montford Point Marines helped to integrate the armed forces and encourage respect for African-American men and women in the armed forces. The men of Montford Point made it impossible for the Marine Corps to return

Melvin, however, regularly went to church (He had no choice; he was a Ballard.), attending Sunday School classes taught by his paternal grandmother Caldonia Withers Ballard Betts and singing solos. He had a beautiful voice!

Times were hard and the family was large--Melvin soon had ten siblings. He and his father sought ways to make additional money. They discovered that iron and steel were valuable. So they picked up both throughout the countryside and sold them to make ends meet.

Melvin's life proceeded accordingly until December 9, 1943 when it intersected with the U.S. war effort and he was drafted into the Marine Corps. He was 18 years old. Upon completion of a physical examination in Tullahoma, Tennessee, he went to Nashville, Tennessee, where he was officially inducted into the Marines, becoming known by serial number--917395. Two weeks later, he left for Camp Montford Point to take his place in the 51st Defense Battalion. Shortly after joining the 51st, he was one of the few chosen for special training in ammunition handling and sharpshooting and then sent to the South Pacific where he loaded ammunition shipside and traveled as an expert sharpshooter. While in the Marines he was also a member of several "Depots" (small labor units), serving, in order, in the 26th, the 8th, and the 22nd Depots.

Melvin was honorably discharged from the Marines, as a corporal, on May 14, 1946. He returned home and worked on the farm with his family until he was hired by the U.S. Army, at Redstone Arsenal, in Huntsville, Alabama, to work in the mailroom. He later worked at Redstone as a crane operator and then for the U.S. Army Missile Command, achieving a high level security clearance. While working at Redstone, he attended West Clinton School on the GI Bill. Though unable to finish school himself, he encouraged the education of his siblings and assisted with the payment of their college tuition. After retiring from the Army, in 1978, he worked part time with North Alabama Moving Company, in Huntsville.

Camp Montford Point was deactivated in September 1949. By then it had served as the site of basic training for approximately 20,000 African Americans, one of whom was Melvin Ballard. On November 23, 2011, President Barack Obama signed bill S. 1527 and H.R. 2447, awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to the Montford Point Marines. Unfortunately, at age 86 and as a cancer survivor, Melvin's health did not allow him to attend this historic event. So today family, friends and elected officials celebrate him and his accomplishments as a Montford Point Marine, one of the nation's first African American Marines.

Ursula T. Doyle
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