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USMC in Black



When the United States Marine Corps began enlisting African Americans in 1942, it marked the beginning of an important chapter in U.S. history. The nearly 20,000 Marines who trained and served at Montford Point, N.C., changed how the Corps and the country viewed racial equality.

The other services were less restrictive at the time, but still had very definite ideas about the ways blacks could serve. A few African Americans were admitted in the Navy, but only as messmen or stewards, and the Army maintained four segregated regiments, where black soldiers could serve in combat. Although a few blacks — slaves and freemen — served in the Continental Marines during the American Revolution, the Corps had not allowed African Americans in its ranks since its reestablishment in 1798.

That all changed in June of 1942...

Story by Lauren Armstrong

& White



The story of the Montford Point Marines

...when President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Presidential Executive Order 8802 that gave African Americans the opportunity to join the Marine Corps. The plan was to train black volunteers at a segregated boot camp at Montford Point, a facility at Camp Lejeune, N.C., and eventually create a composite defense battalion that would be racially segregated and commanded by white officers.

Recruiting was slow at first, but by October, about half of the 1,200 recruits needed to man a battalion and handle the required administrative and support functions had enlisted. Some joined to take advantage of an opportunity that had been denied to them for 150 years. Some had seen movies of WWI Marines, were impressed by their courage and wanted to be like them. Some saw it as a personal challenge and felt they had something to prove. Others simply liked the uniform. But all joined to fight and defend the country they loved. The expansion of the draft in December 1942 allowed quotas to be established by the services and ensured that 1,000 African Americans would enter the Marine Corps each month.

Making Marines

The first Montford Pointers, as they came to be called, arrived in late August, 1942, and immediately began experiencing the rigors of recruit training, not unlike those experienced by Marines at Parris Island or San Diego.

“It was a completely different world all together,” reminisces Reuben McNair, who arrived at Montford Point in 1944 and would advance to the rank of gunnery

sergeant. “I most certainly didn’t expect to be yelled at and screamed at or given a rough time. When I left home, I vowed church would be one of the last places I’d go. But after one week at Montford Point – the yelling, screaming, running, saluting every person you saw with an emblem on his cap — I almost knocked the door down [to get to church].”

The recruits were trained by an initial cadre of approximately 25 white officers and 90 white enlisted men, who formed the Special Enlisted Staff and initially handled duties that ranged from administrative tasks to serving as drill instructors. They would hold these positions until black replacements could be trained and promoted for such responsibilities. Each member of the Special Enlisted Staff was screened to ensure that none opposed the presence of blacks in the Corps.

It was imperative that the most qualified recruits be identified and cultivated for positions of enlisted leadership as quickly as possible. Using written and oral exams and their own experience, the drill instructors determined which recruits had leadership potential and the first Montford Point promotions took place in November 1942, a month

before the recruits had completed boot camp. Among those early leaders was Gilbert “Hashmark” Johnson, who earned his nickname because his previous Army and Navy service earned him three diagonal stripes, called hashmarks, on his Marine uniform. Because of his infantry experience as a company clerk, mortar gunner and squad leader, he quickly earned a position as a drill instructor and eventually became the Battalion Sergeant Major of the Montford Point Recruit Depot Battalion. Following his death in 1972, the Marine Corps paid tribute to him by renaming Montford Point as Camp Gilbert H. Johnson.

By the time Joseph Carpenter arrived at Montford Point in mid-1943, most of the drill instructors (DIs) were black. “There were still a few whites around, but basically the black DIs were taking over. We thought that would be good, but we found that was worse. They were determined to make us succeed and be real Marines. That was their main goal, to be sure we were going to be better than everyone else.”

“We were fortunate because if you were an African American and you enlisted in the Marine Corps, regardless of what your education, your training or occupation, you ended up [at Montford Point.] As a result, we had professors, lawyers, people who had studied medicine,” adds Carpenter. “We had excellent leadership. Those were the people that really kept us together, because they were old enough and wise enough to guide us.”

Segregated Marines

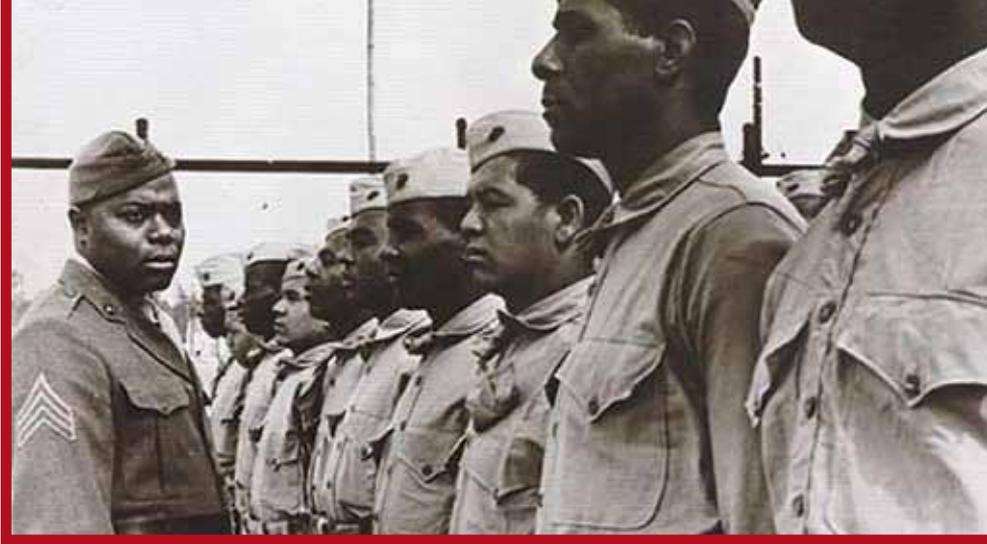
Although these trailblazing Marines were prepared for the challenges of training and combat, some were not ready for the racial discrimination they experienced in the South. Those traveling from northern cities, where racial lines weren't so distinctly drawn, were particularly surprised to find themselves in a part of the country where segregation and Jim Crow laws prevailed. They were not allowed to set foot on the neighboring Camp Lejeune unless they were accompanied by a white Marine. Porters ousted black passengers from sleeping cars when they passed the "black line" in Washington, D.C., south of which rail travel was segregated. Joseph Carpenter and his fellow recruits, who traveled to Montford Point in May of 1943, were denied food service on their journey from the nation's capital.

"We left D.C. around 7:00 in the morning ... and traveled by train. All the blacks rode in the car behind the coal car," recalls Carpenter. "Because of segregation, we weren't allowed to eat in the dining car. When we pulled into Rocky Mount, [N.C.], we followed the crowd into the train station, until this big cop comes up to us and says, 'Where the hell do you niggers think you're going?' He told us we had to go around the side [to eat]. We weren't about to argue with him."

When Carpenter and his fellow recruits went to the food service window at the side of the station, the white waitress ignored them. When they moved on to the bus station in town, they ran into the same problem. They felt confident they'd find food at the base, but by the time they arrived at Montford Point, the mess hall was closed.

"The next morning, we had to get our uniforms, package stuff up to send home and we had to wait till lunchtime for food," explains Carpenter.

This was indicative of the challenges the Montford Pointers



By late 1943, white drill instructors had been replaced by African Americans. Here Sgt. Gilbert "Hashmark" Johnson, one of the first and most respected black drill instructors, reviews troops on Montford Point.

would continue to face. By the time McNair arrived at boot camp in February of 1944, all the drill instructors were black. "You couldn't say you were discriminated against by your own. The only discrimination I really observed was once I left the base," he recalls.

Liberty calls were intimidating remembers Carpenter. "This was my first time in the Deep South. We'd heard of all the lynching and read about the Ku Klux Klan and all that, so I wasn't too anxious to go out on the town on liberty."

Instead, he'd try to get back home to D.C. when he had the chance, but there was only one bus station in Jacksonville. "There were two lines — one for whites and one for African Americans. The whites got on first and, if there were any seats left over, we were allowed to get on. If there were enough whites to fill the bus, we couldn't get on."

The Montford Pointers faced similar problems at the train station in Rocky Mount. There was only one coach for blacks and troops from Fort Bragg would often fill it up before it even got to Rocky Mount.

And if they managed to get off the base for a little R&R, they often had similar difficulties getting back to their quarters before curfew. By law, bus drivers gave white passengers priority and restricted black riders to the rear of the bus, unless the space was needed for white

passengers. This often resulted in black Marines being left standing at the bus stop "as the deadline for returning to Montford Point drew nearer," according to Bernard C. Nalty's commentary on *The Right to Fight: African-American Marines in World War II*. "When this happened, angry black Marines, at the risk of violence from the local police, might commandeer a bus, remove the driver and take it to the gate nearest Jacksonville, where the transit company could retrieve it on the next morning." Colonel Samuel Woods, sometimes called the Great White Father of the Montford Point Camp he commanded, helped remedy this problem by sending battalion trucks into town to pick up the Marines and return them to the post.

Carpenter also recalls some Montford Pointers getting arrested for impersonating Marines. "I guess some folks had never seen an African American in a Marine uniform before. They had to send white officers to get them out of jail, sometimes to lock-ups as far away as Texas."

The Corps, like the country, grappled with the social and structural issues of integration. In March of 1943, General Thomas Holcomb, Commandant of the Marine Corps, issued a classified directive that made it clear "in no case shall there be colored noncommissioned officers senior to white men in the

same unit, and desirable that few, if any, be of the same rank.” As a result, qualified African-American Marines were often overlooked when a promotion would put him in a higher pay grade than a white Marine in his unit.

These instances made the recruits even more aware that they’d have to overcome racism in order to prove they were qualified to serve as Marines. This created a bond of solidarity among them and inspired them to work even harder throughout their military service to show they were worthy to wear the Eagle, Globe and Anchor.

Well Prepared for Combat

The Corps’ general policy was to assign African-American Marines to combat support roles. This was frustrating to Marines like Rueben McNair, who was an excellent marksman.

“I was an expert rifle shooter when I came out of boot camp,” he recalls with pride. “I could stand 50 yards away and strike a match with a .22. I made PFC [private first class] the day I left the rifle range and sort of anticipated that I would be among those who would fight. But [black] rifle companies were [non-existent; we were] ammunition companies.”

The first Montford Point Marines were trained to form the 51st Composite Defense Battalion, which was activated on August 18, 1942. It was the first black combat



A dress uniform wasn't a part of the standard uniform issue in 1943, yet most of the Montford Point Marines spent \$54 out of their pay for what was generally considered the sharpest uniform by most of them.

unit and briefly remained the sole organization of its kind until the 52nd Defense Battalion was fully manned a short time later. Marine defense battalions trained independently and operated in isolated areas, making them the perfect vehicle for integrating African Americans into Marine Corps.

As black noncommissioned officers became more familiar with handling weapons and other combat skills, they began to take over the leadership responsibilities from the white NCOs who’d trained them and, by January of 1944, the 51st Defense Battalion (the designator “Composite” was dropped) was on its way to the Pacific.

Despite their combat support role, McNair and many of his fellow Montford Pointers saw plenty of action in the Pacific and were heroes at Peleliu. “We were taking ammunition up to the front line and bringing the wounded back. At one point, we were in a tight position there. We

began to pull out the rifles and were taking charge and secured the area.”

The white Marines they’d assisted began referring the Montford Pointers as “the Black Angels” who’d saved them. At the time, McNair was uncomfortable about being called black, but later came to accept the label with pride.

“We brought those people back and this is something that’s in history. Later, when we heard James Brown say he was black and proud, I felt proud for that, too.”

Paving the Way

The Montford Point Marines paved the way for racial integration in the Marine Corps and also in the nation. “We opened the door for those who followed after us,” says Carpenter. “We withstood a lot of harassment — even from our fellow Marines — and that continued through the war and after, until Truman [ordered racial integration of the military in 1948]. But today’s Marines are standing on our shoulders, just as each new generation benefits from the previous one.”

“It’s a sad commentary, but I prayed there would be another war,” admits McNair. “I thought that if there was another war, I could do things to prove we were equal and could do the same things as everyone else. I saw how much progress we’d made toward racial equality during World War II and I thought that if we could have another war, we’d advance even further.”

Peleliu Island...Marines move through the trenches on the beach during the battle.



McNair got his wish and was eager to be a part of the Korean Conflict. He participated in the Chosin Reservoir campaign and, by that point, was serving side-by-side with whites. Even so, he felt deserved promotions were sometimes withheld from black Marines and it would be the late 1950s before he'd see a black officer. And he would

still experience slights from whites.

"When I returned to Camp Lejeune [after duty in Korea], my first sergeant introduced me to my new platoon leader," recalls McNair. "I reached out to shake hands and he just looked at me like I was a piece of dirt. He refused to shake my hand."

By the early 1960s, McNair felt that things were changing for the

better. "I realized I no longer had anything to prove," he says. "I have three sons; two are doctors. I tell them that I paid for the opportunities they have. I tell them they don't have to go out like I did in the Marine Corps, wishing for war to prove that they can make a change."

Among the many Marines who continue to be motivated by the

The Montford Point Marine Association — Preserving the Legacy

The Montford Point Marine Association (MPMA) is a non-profit organization whose primary mission is to preserve the legacy of the Montford Point Marines and ensure their important contributions to American history aren't forgotten.

Established in 1965, the MPMA now has 36 chapters across the U.S. and about 2,200 members, explains James Averhart, MPMA's national president. "The only requirement for membership is 90 days of military service and an honorable discharge. You don't have to be black or a Marine to be a member of MPMA."

"The MPMA offers scholarships and does community service projects, but our mission is really to preserve the legacy," adds General J. Gary Cooper, USMC (Ret.), who is a lifetime member of the organization. "I didn't know about the Montford Point Marines until I got to be a captain. Young officers need to learn and understand what these men did before today's leaders were even born."

Averhart learned about the MPMA 14 years ago and immediately related to the Montford Pointers' story. He started the MPMA chapter at Quantico, Va., in 2005 and had no idea it would lead to his election as the organization's national president in 2009. In addition to educating both Marines and non-Marines about these American heroes, Averhart wants to ensure they receive the recognition they deserve.

"The Montford Point Marines are heroes and many Americans don't know about them. I want people to know they existed and the strides they made. I'd like the Montford Point Marines to reach the same level of national prominence as the Tuskegee Airmen, the Buffalo Soldiers, the Triple Nickel and the Golden 13," said Averhart, referencing the African-Americans who made history in the Army and Navy.

To that end, the MPMA is working to see that the original Montford Point Marines receive a Congressional Gold Medal, similar to the honor bestowed upon the Tuskegee Airmen and Navajo Code Talkers. Legislation (S. 1695) to recognize the Montford Pointers was introduced in the 111th Congress and was endorsed by former Commandant of the Marine Corps James Conway and the FRA. If the measure isn't passed before Congress adjourns this month, a new bill is expected to be introduced in the 112th Congress.

There is also an effort to construct a fitting memorial to honor the Montford Point Marines, educate and inspire youngsters and Marines, and instill the value of perseverance. A capital campaign is underway to erect the monument at Camp Johnson in Jacksonville, N.C., with hopes to unveil it in 2012. To learn more about the monument or contribute to its construction, visit <http://mpmamemorial.com>. Visit www.montfordpointmarines.com to learn about this and other initiatives of the MPMA.

"Our efforts are relevant because the Montford Point Marines' story isn't just U.S. history or black history," says Averhart. "It's Marine Corps history."



Montford Pointers' legacy is Major General J. Gary Cooper, USMCR (Ret.), and retired U.S. Ambassador to Jamaica. "The Montford Point Marines have been an inspiration to me," says Cooper. "Their challenges made me understand and helped me get through the challenges I faced. I wanted to be the best; to run faster and farther. If someone looked better than I did, I'd change my uniform. When you're the only [black member] in the unit, you can't have a bad day. [I told myself that] if they could do it then, I can do it now."

Though Cooper joined the Marine Corps 16 years after the opening of Montford Point, he still faced ... and overcame ... significant racial barriers. He wanted an assignment to 8th and I, the Marine Corps Barracks in Washington, D.C., but no Negroes were permitted. He was thrilled to later receive orders to serve as the commanding officer of the Marine Detachment aboard the USS Chicago. "I knew that only the sharpest Marines got those assignments," Cooper recalls. "When I reported, I was told the assignment had been delayed for a week. Twenty years later I learned they hadn't seen 'Negro' in my file until after the assignment had been made. I was the first and they weren't sure how to handle it."

During the Vietnam War, Cooper became the first African American in Marine Corps history to lead an infantry company into combat. "Blacks usually went to supply, but not to command positions. About 15 to 20 percent of the enlisted fighting unit was black and when they saw me show up as their leader, they had a different look in their eyes. I believe they worked harder to make me successful. I'm convinced that no other organization has done more to promote equal rights than the armed forces. I learned invaluable leadership skills that served me well during my military career and in my civilian life," says Cooper, who returned to his native Alabama and won a seat in the



Aboard a Coast Guard-manned transport, a black Marine, Robert Stockman, goes over his carbine with Coast Guardsmen.

state legislature when many parts of the state were still segregated.

A Legacy of Commitment and Dedication

The Montford Point Marines' legacy continues to inspire today. Today's Marines, particularly those of color, identify with the Montford Pointers when they face challenges or adversity.

"There were times, earlier in my career, when I was the only African American out of 21 corrections officers," explains CWO4 James Averhart, a 23-year career Marine who is currently the commanding officer of the brig at Quantico Marine Base in Virginia. "Being in the minority caused me concerns, but it also made me work harder."

"I'm proud of what's happening in today's Marine Corps. In 1943, the highest ranking black man I saw was a corporal or a buck sergeant," says Carpenter, who earned a degree and returned to the Corps to retire as a lieutenant colonel. "I had no idea that I'd live to see a black general, but I knew that whatever legacy we left would certainly affect others who might want to come [after us]."

"The Marine Corps has come a long way," echoes Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Carlton Kent. "The Marine Corps should look like America and the Montford Point Marines are proud of what the Corps is doing to make that happen.

Like today's Marines, they love the title of being a Marine and have the Eagle, Globe and Anchor branded in their hearts."

"It was only 68 years ago that the Montford Pointers attended the Corps' segregated boot camp, which really isn't that long ago. We've made significant strides in diversity and equal rights since then and things have improved tremendously since the Montford Point days. Promotion and education opportunities are better," says Averhart, who holds two masters degrees and is working on his doctorate in theology.

"The Montford Point Marines seized the opportunity to lead the way, they laid the foundation and left a legacy of commitment and dedication that allowed me and other African Americans to be where we are today," continues Averhart, who is also the national president of the Montford Point Marine Association. "We have an African American Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps and we have 16 African-American general officers today. The Corps is all about being the best and most qualified. The Montford Point Marines allowed minorities to prove they could contribute in significant ways."



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