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HAGAN & BIPARTISAN SENATORS INTRODUCE BILL TO AWARD FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN MARINES IN U.S. HISTORY WITH CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL

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Sep 08, 2011 (Congressional Documents and Publications/ContentWorks via COMTEX) -- HAGAN & BIPARTISAN SENATORS INTRODUCE BILL TO AWARD FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN MARINES IN U.S. HISTORY WITH CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL

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Washington, D.C. - U.S. Senator Kay R. Hagan (D-NC) today joined Senators Richard Burr (R-NC), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Patrick Roberts (R-KS), and Charles E. Schumer (D-NY) as lead sponsors of legislation to award the Congressional Gold Medal to the Montford Point Marines, the first African Americans to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps. The Congressional Gold Medal, along with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, is the highest civilian award in the United States. This award would finally recognize the historic and dedicated service of the Montford Point Marines during World War II.

"It is with great honor that I join my colleagues in introducing this bill to provide the Montford Point Marines, based out of the most military-friendly state in the nation, North Carolina, the long awaited recognition they deserve for their service and sacrifice for our country. The courage and dedication with which these brave men served our country despite discrimination and intolerance is nothing less than heroic," said Hagan.

"The Montford Point Marines led the way for generations of African-Americans who have strengthened our military across the ranks and reached the highest levels of our military's leadership. Their bravery and perseverance should be remembered as an example of patriotism and loyal service despite the significant challenges they faced," said Burr. "The Montford Point Marines personify the shared values of duty and sacrifice of the courageous warriors who wear the Eagle, Globe and Anchor. They overcame segregation and racism to defend our freedom. The Marine Corps and our nation are all the better for their example. I am proud to be a co-sponsor of this legislation which will award them the Congressional Gold Medal and honor their legacy as Marines and patriots," said Blumenthal.

"As the senior Marine in the Senate, I am pleased to be a part of this important and overdue effort to honor the Montford Point Marines with the recognition they deserve for their sacrifice and service in World War II, especially given the discrimination and hardships they faced," Roberts said. "This is an important distinction and one I know the Commandant, General Amos, cares deeply about. As our Corps has changed over the years, our motto has stayed true: Simper Fidelis. Always faithful."

"As the first African American Marines, the Montford Point Marines made history, bravely enduring prejudice while risking their lives for their country in World War II. By awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to this group, which includes Mayor David Dinkins, we can finally honor them with the recognition they deserve," said Schumer. The Montford Point Marines is the name given to the first African Americans who served in the U.S. Marine Corps. They were trained at Camp Montford Point, near Jacksonville, North Carolina. African Americans were brought into the Marine Corps in 1941, as a result of an executive order signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The executive order, which established the Fair Employment Practices Commission, stated that "there shall be no discrimination in Overall, 19,168 African American Marines received training at Montford Point between 1942 and 1949, many of whom participated in the Pacific Theatre Campaign of World War II, distinguishing themselves by acts of great valor.

As Congress's highest national honor, the Congressional Gold Medal would provide a fitting tribute to the bravery and sacrifice of the Montford Point Marines during World War II. The Congressional Gold Medal will be given to the Smithsonian Institution, where it will be displayed, as appropriate, and made available for research. The service of these Marines, as warriors in the Pacific and pioneers in American society, has made America stronger in its endeavors abroad and mindful of the need for continued work against discrimination at home.

Since 1965, the Montford Point Marine Association, a charitable nonprofit veterans organization, has preserved the legacy of the first African American Marines and today the Association has 36 chapters throughout the United States. This Association has several memorials in place to perpetuate the memory of the Montford Marines and their accomplishments.