

Montford Point Marines

Awarded the Congressional Gold Medal



MGySgt Norman D. Epkin, USMC (Ret), one of the last Montford Point Marines to retire from active duty, returned to Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., where he was stationed in 1946, to attend the parade and award ceremony June 29, 2012.



LtGen Willie J. Williams, senior active-duty African-American Marine, awards a replica Congressional Gold Medal to a Montford Point Marine. Some 430 Montford Point Marines were awarded medals that were provided by the Marine Corps Association & Foundation.



Story and photos by Clare A. Guerrero

I can remember when I first went to the train station to go to basic training, and when I got to Union Station, I went to board the train, and the conductor said, ‘All blacks have to sit behind the coal car,’ ” said former Corporal James E. Brooks. He had to pause; the silence told all. Tears streamed down the face of the earliest Montford Point Marine enlistee present at the parade and award ceremony at Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., June 29. “So that was just the beginning. It was a great bunch of guys. And I fought for ‘em,” he said.

One day earlier, on June 28, the Montford Point Marines were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in a special ceremony at Emancipation Hall in the United States Capitol Visitor Center. Marine veteran William McDowell was proud to accept the medal on behalf of all the Montford Point Marines.

The Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor awarded as an ex-

pression of national appreciation for distinguished service and contribution, brought this group of “giants” into the spotlight—heroes who had served their country unceremoniously, many without promotion, and during segregation.

“Today we gather to pay tribute, as the gold medal inscription says, to perseverance and courage of a small group of giants in American history, the Montford Point Marines,” said Rep. Nancy Pelosi at the Capitol ceremony.

“In an age of inequality, breaking the color barrier in the Marine Corps took nothing less than perseverance, patriotism and courage of extraordinary proportions. Fighting for a segregated America required that extra dose of patriotism. Yet for the men of Montford Point, the reason to join the Marines was about something more basic. There was a war raging abroad, and they saw it as their duty to fight for their country. As one of the early recruits said, ‘I joined the Marine Corps because I thought it to be the proper thing to do, to be patriotic to my country. I felt this was

history in the making.’ ”

“I don’t think we imagined that anything like this would happen in our lifetime,” said McDowell at the presentation. “It does sadden me that so many of our brothers are not with us here today. The upside of it all is that we do remember each and every one of them. They’re in our hearts and our minds. And they shall never be forgotten.”

The following morning, at Marine Barracks Washington, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James F. Amos, hosted a parade and ceremony to honor the special contributions of the Montford Point Marines and to award each with a bronze replica of the Congressional Gold Medal, which were paid for by a donation from the Marine Corps Association & Foundation.

The event drew approximately 430 still tough-as-iron Montford Point Marines to the Barracks. Many were sporting wheelchairs parked in rows spanning the entire length of the parade ground. The Montford Point “giants” withstood the sweltering



Montford Point Marines make a presence at MB Washington— as rows of seats and wheelchairs stretch across the entire length of the parade ground.

heat that even got the best of some members of the Barracks marching units.

The ceremony opened with the reading of a statement by President Barack H. Obama attesting to the Montford Point Marines' service to Corps and country. Leading the parade, "The President's Own" United States Marine Band played "Riders for the Flag" and "The Stars and Stripes Forever," both composed by the legendary Marine "March King," John Philip Sousa. Following the Barracks traditional parade sequence, the marching companies filed from the inner crevices of the barracks to come on line and then execute the "manual of arms" and follow with the presentation of the colors.

During the formal presentation of the replica Congressional Gold Medals, senior Marine Corps leaders moved down the lines of Montford Point Marines, looping a ribbon holding a medal over the head of each Marine. Many Montford Point Marines rose from their seats and wheelchairs to accept the medals; the honor was met with both smiles and tears.

During his remarks, Gen Amos shared with the attendees some meaningful details that contributed to the organization and coordination of the event, singling out Lieutenant General Willie J. Williams, the senior active-duty African-American Marine, and Colonel Stephanie Smith, for

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their efforts in coordinating the event.

Smith volunteered for the arduous task of tracking down the Montford Point Marines. The Commandant said he learned the significance of Col Smith's dedication and perseverance to the project: her father, Ernie Smith, who was present in the crowd,

went through boot camp at Montford Point. Smith expressed immense pride that her father was a Montford Point Marine.

Special recognition also was given to Rep. Corrine Brown from the 3rd District in Florida, and North Carolina Sen. Kay Hagan, for their contributions in getting the bill passed in the House of Representatives and in the Senate.

Rep. Brown said during the ceremony held at the U.S. Capitol the day before that Gen Amos "led the fight," in what she said she thought was the most bipartisan-supported bill that would be passed in Congress this year. "[And] everybody worked together to honor [the] Montford Point Marines."

The Commandant expressed his pride in being part of the historical moment 70 years in the making, noting the significant timing of the event held in proximity to Executive Order No. 8802, signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, June 25, 1941, that banned discrimination for color or race in branches of the government and the U.S. Armed Forces. A little more than

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That was the key; the key to our existence.”— Former Cpl James E. Brooks**

a year later, on Aug. 26, 1942, the first one of nearly 20,000 African-American volunteers, Howard Perry of Charlotte, N.C., arrived at the site that was then known as “Mumford Point.”

“When [the first volunteers] showed up, they had to build their own camp, they had to clear off the land at Montford Point from the trees and the snakes and the bears, and they had to build their own tents. And then after they were all done doing that, they had to become recruits and then become Marines,” the Commandant said. “And so it’s long overdue. ... So today is a historical day in our Marine Corps—236½ years of history—and now this has been inserted into our history right where it should be. And I’m pretty proud of it.”

In the tradition of the Corps, the Montford Point Marines created their own illustrious boot print in history. The attractive opportunity to serve in the Marine Corps drew African-Americans of diverse backgrounds. Whether university-educated or farm-raised, all were vetted in the tradition of Marine Corps Recruit Depots San Diego and Parris Island. Montford Point’s all-black drill instructors had a reputation for being among some of the toughest—and trained some of the Corps’ finest.

Assisting with numerous operations during World War II, the Montford Point Marines watched landmark events unfold as part of their own story.

“I served during the Pacific War,” said Brooks. “I was part of the antiaircraft ... M7 director ... and I was in charge of a battery—and I took care of what happened in the air when the ‘birds’ came and I would direct them with little knobs onto the target. I was at Guam and at Eniwetok. I was at Eniwetok when they dropped the first atomic test bomb in the South Pacific, because we were getting ready for the invasion of Japan. So we were willing and ready.”

Although they were Marines, African-Americans endured the stigma of inequality daily. “I could not sleep in the barracks because of the segregation; I had to sleep in the basement. And when we went to the chow hall to eat, we had to sit at a table that said ‘colored only,’” said Norman D. Epkin, who served at Marine Barracks Washington, beginning in 1946. “But we got along good with the whites. We would go down to the pool hall and shoot pool and go down to the bowling alley and



Gen James F. Amos gives special recognition to Rep. Corrine Brown, left, from the 3rd District in Florida, and North Carolina Sen. Kay Hagan for their efforts in getting the bill passed for the Montford Point Marines’ Congressional Gold Medal in the House of Representatives and in the Senate.

bowl. But we couldn’t sleep in the barracks with them, and we couldn’t eat at the table with them.”

Because the African-American Marines were limited to combat service support units, many Montford Point Marines were eager to take up arms and fight for their right to fight, volunteering for many hardships in an effort to prove to the leadership their value in combat. “We had to go through rigid training, and the whole nine yards, but we didn’t worry about that,” said Brooks, who said he served as a platoon runner only two weeks after the platoon was formed. “The main thing we wanted was to be treated fairly. That was the key; the key to our existence. And I made sure of that.”

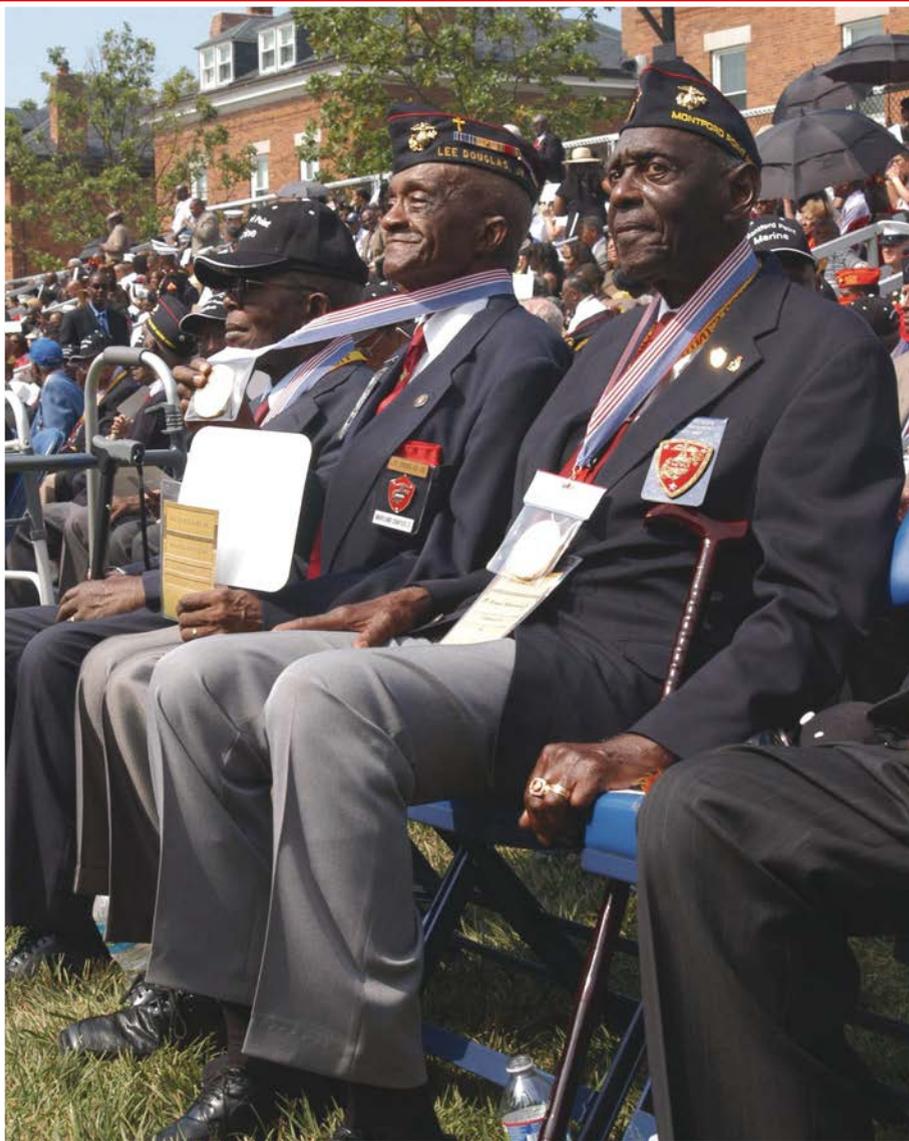
Many Montford Point Marines proved their valor when wartime circumstances brought them new responsibilities, as in the case of former Private First Class Vincent R. Long, another parade attendee. Long served with the 20th Depot Co, one of the units awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for heroic action on Saipan in WW II. Long was in the Fourth Marine Division when it hit Saipan.

He claimed that his unit was pulled into action by default, when another division was slow to get into position. “We were told ... ‘Gentlemen, what you fellas do here today will depend on the outcome [of the

future] of African-American Marines.’ So they took all of us who were down in [the Depot Company] and put us into this [combat] pocket, and [we] were able to detain [the enemy] for three days until reinforcements came through. But we were in combat and also supply a lot of times. When we first landed, [we were] right there in the water, knee-deep, waist-deep, and one of the barges with supplies got hit, and we [kept] unloading ... because they needed those supplies.”

As predicted, the combat actions of the service support companies on Saipan, Tinian and Guam gained national attention. According to Bernard C. Nalty in “The Right to Fight: African-American Marines in World War II,” a monograph in the Marines in World War II Commemorative Series, then-Commandant of the Marine Corps “Lieutenant General Alexander A. Vandegrift ... declared: ‘The Negro Marines are no longer on trial. They are Marines, period.’ *Time’s* war correspondent in the Central Pacific, Robert Sherrod, wrote, ‘The Negro Marines, under fire for the first time, have rated a universal 4.0 on Saipan.’ ”

The heroic efforts of those Montford Point Marines who served during WW II influenced President Harry S. Truman’s decision to desegregate the U.S. Armed Forces in 1948. Montford Point was closed



Above: Montford Point Marines proudly display their medals after the awards ceremony.

Below: Former Cpl James E. Brooks, the oldest Montford Point enlistee in attendance, gives a playful salute to LtGen Willie J. Williams during the parade and award ceremony reception. Brooks stood with the Commandant and African-American senior leaders of the Corps to salute the Barracks' marching companies during the "Pass in Review."



in 1949 and later renamed "Camp Johnson," after Master Sergeant Gilbert H. Johnson, the legendary Montford Point African-American drill instructor.

As for the Marines who served there, they continued their lives in service to their country—some in continued service to the Corps, others in civil service, and all as leathernecks, who placed great value on hard work, equal opportunity, freedom and love for their country.

"You never turn your back on your country," said Long. "There is no other place I know of that I want to live."

Brooks went on to work in the Department of Labor, at both the Pentagon and the Navy Yard. At 90 years of age, he still runs and plays tennis. "I do it all," Brooks said with a smile.

Long, who was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., returned to his beloved city and served a 35-year career with New York City Transit. He started out as a bus driver and worked his way up to train operator, then became a supervisor of a train yard and eventually a yardmaster. He credited the Marine Corps for "making a man" out of him.

Epkin, the epitome of a joyful spirit, who attended the ceremony in dress blues, said he fully enjoyed the life he had in the Corps, and "being a jarhead" was the best thing of all. Epkin held a cook's military occupational specialty, 3371, and worked in officers' clubs. He retired as a master gunnery sergeant.

MGySgt Epkin was one of the last Montford Point staff noncommissioned officers to retire from the Corps. "I didn't get discouraged," he said. "I did what I had to do. Shoot, I served 32 years, 2 months and 13 days. And I thank God he brought me through, because it's not my doing. When you go through three wars and come back without a scratch, you have something to be thankful for."

"There has been a momentous increase in consideration of all races in the Marine Corps, because we had to fight for it," said Brooks.

At the close of the ceremony, Brooks stood with the Commandant and senior African-American leaders of the Corps during the "Pass in Review." Many Montford Point Marines rose from their seats and wheelchairs to salute and return the honor to their Marines—their Corps.

