



Marine from Woodbury to receive Congressional Gold Medal 66 years later

By Bob Shryock | South Jersey Times
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View full size Marine Veteran Victor Browne of Woodbury will receive the Congressional Gold Medal at the U.S. Visitors Center in Washington, D.C. Staff Photo by Tim Hawk/Gloucester County Times Hugh Victor Browne II graduated from Woodbury High School in June 1943 and was taking a carefree walk near 13th and Market streets in Philadelphia a month later when a Marine recruiter cornered him. “How’d you like to be a Marine?” the recruiter asked.

Responded Browne, “I knew I could pass the mental part. But I was 4-F because of a trick knee. I was tested anyway and passed everything. They swore me in right there. The recruiter said, ‘Now go to the drug store, buy a leather (travel) bag, bar of soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, and call your mother.’ Then they said they’d take me to 30th Street Station. ‘My sister (Juanita) answered the phone and just listened. In the background, I hear my mother yell, ‘Victor, now you come home.’ I said, ‘I will when I get out of boot camp.’”

Within hours, Browne was on a southbound train to join the Montford Point Marines - the military’s first black Marine unit - in boot camp near all-white Camp Lejeune, N.C. He believes he was not only Woodbury’s first black Marine recruited but one of the first in New Jersey. Browne, now a Marine-proud, 87-years-old and still living on Carpenter Street in Woodbury, was among the nearly 20,000 black men who dealt with segregation and racism to break the Marine color barrier in the midst of World War II.

Cpl. Browne is among the several hundred Montford Point black Marines still living, including perhaps a dozen in the Delaware Valley, who next month will receive the Congressional Gold Medal, highest civilian award, for distinguished achievement, at the U.S. Visitors Center in Washington, D.C. Date and time are unconfirmed. (Hildreth “Rudy” Hardy, also of Woodbury, will be honored posthumously.)

Last December, President Obama signed the bill awarding the medal to all Montford Point survivors. If Obama’s schedule permits, he is expected to present the medal. One gold medal will be minted and bronze replicas presented to each living Montford Point Marine as well as relatives of those who have died since Obama signed the law.

“I never thought I’d get a medal like that, and I can’t wait,” says Browne, who is rarely seen around Woodbury without his trademark camouflage Marine cap and Marine logo sweat shirt. “I was discharged 66 years ago, and it took a black President to get this done. But this is the highest civilian honor you can get, and I’m proud to be a recipient. “The medal is for what we had to put up with to become Marines. I’m going to wear it and show it off. I’m still proud to be a United States Marine.”

Browne is only surviving sibling (and the youngest) of the six children born to Baptist minister Rev. Sylvanus and Lovie Browne, who resided on Carpenter Street in Woodbury. The others were Sylvanus Jr., Arthur (Ted), Douglas, Juanita, and Roscoe Lee, the latter famed internationally as an Emmy-winning actor with a distinctive bass voice. Track standout Roscoe Lee also is enshrined in the Gloucester County Sports Hall of Fame. Vic says he figured the Marines were willing to take anyone at that time, even someone with a bad knee, “because they’d lost so many men in combat.” But two years earlier, President Franklin D. Roosevelt set the tone by issuing an order banning exclusion in any branch of the military because of race. Montford Point boot camp, Vic recalls, was no picnic.

Housed in corrugated metal huts with no running water, the men had to walk “half a block” to go to the bathroom. The area was rife with alligators, snakes, mosquitos and muskrats. While all of the enlisted men were black the officers were all white. But the black drill instructors, men like former Philadelphia councilman and civil rights activist Cecil B. Moore, “made us Marines.”

While Browne downplays charges of racism, he concedes “conditions were terrible” at Montford Point. Other survivors have charged “bigotry was rampant” and “we were treated terribly.” Browne got lucky. After boot camp, he was assigned to the Hawaiian island of Oahu at Camp Catlin, two years after Pearl Harbor. He raised his hand affirmatively when asked if anyone could type and was made paymaster assigned to the 17th Marine Depot.

He spent his entire service time on Oahu in support, along with other first-wave black Marines, of battle-tested Marines serving on Iwo Jima, Guam, and throughout the Pacific theater. Many had guard duty. Others were placed in segregated ammunition and depot companies headed by white officers (it wasn’t until a decade later the Marine Corps successfully dissolved segregation). But still others gave their lives in infamous Pacific battles like Saipan and Okinawa and ultimately helped break down the racial barriers that existed throughout America.

One of six children, Vic is the father of six, including son Craig, an Army master sergeant based in Stone Mountain, Ga., decorated drill instructor, and career soldier with 30 years invested. Wife Erma died 18 years ago.

Vic’s work career included time with the veterans’ Administration and driving for Yellow Cab in Camden. He currently works as a security guard.

Calling himself a “late bloomer,” Vic says he grew about four inches in boot camp. He’s handsome, well-spoken, and does not look 87. Vic does have a hearing problem and some memory loss from a serious accident in South Woodbury near his home in 2008 when he was struck by a car crossing the street. “I could have died,” he says. “When I woke up, the first thing I said was, ‘Where’s my (Marine) hat. Every day I wear this hat. “You see, I am a United States Marine. Just ask my kids.”

