



Victor Browne receives his Congressional Gold Medal in Washington, D.C. ceremon

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Victor Browne, of Woodbury, holds his Congressional Gold Medal that he received in a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

There's a longstanding military adage about there being no such Marine as an "ex-Marine." Woodbury's Hugh **Victor Browne II**, a Montford Point Marine and decidedly no "ex," can go one better. "When I'm dead, I'll be a dead Marine," says Browne in that familiar booming family voice that characterized his famed actor-brother, Roscoe Lee Browne.

The eternally proud Marine has never been prouder. He was in Washington, D.C. last Tuesday to receive the country's highest civilian award for distinguished achievement, the **Congressional Gold Medal**, in a ceremony that started at the visitors' center and concluded with the medal presentation at the Marine Corps barracks on an oppressively hot day.

About 400 were presented medals, some living, some posthumously, as the U.S. Marine Band played to help highlight the pageantry. "It was more than I ever hoped it would be," said Browne, the only honoree who wore his signature camouflage Marine cap — one he's rarely without — during the ceremony and was signaled out for it by one of the attending generals. "They read the names of every honoree, along with a beautiful letter from President Obama, who made the day possible by signing the bill. I never saw so many black officers. I'm just so happy. It was a long time coming. This is the highest civilian honor a person can get, and I'm proud to be a recipient." Browne's children were there to enjoy the moment — son Craig, an Army master sergeant and decorated drill instructor, and daughter Lovie Tarver, whose husband Sam is an officer in the Navy.

The military housed Browne and his compatriots at the Hyatt and "paid for everything. It was first class all the way." One gold medal was minted with replicas presented to living Montford Point Marines and relatives of the ones who have died since the bill was signed into law.

Montford Point Marines represented the military's first all-black Marine unit. Their boot camp was located near all-white Camp Lejeune, N.C. Browne depicts a bleak scene. His unit lived in corrugated metal huts without running water. The men walked "half a block" to go to the bathroom and had to deal with alligators, snakes and mosquitoes. All officers were white, but Browne credits black drill instructors who "made us Marines."

Browne admits conditions were poor at Montford Point but has downplayed charges of rampant bigotry addressed by others in the unit. Browne, 87, a Carpenter Street resident, was one of the approximately 20,000 black men who helped break the Marine color barrier during World War II. Browne graduated from Woodbury High School in 1943. A month later, he was walking near 13th and Market in Philadelphia when his life changed dramatically in moments.

A recruiter stopped Browne and asked him if he'd like to be a Marine. The thought intrigued him. Concerned he was 4-F because of a trick knee, he tested anyway, and "passed everything." He says he was sworn in on the spot. The recruiter instructed him to go to a nearby drug store, purchase a travel bag, bar of soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, "and call your mother."

He did just that. But his unamused mom, Lovie Browne, told him to come home immediately. "I will," Victor said, "when I get out of boot camp." Within hours, Browne boarded a southbound train to join the newly forming Montford Point Marines. He believes he was among the first black Marines recruited in New Jersey.

After Montford Point boot camp, Marine life got easier for Browne. Assigned to Oahu in the Hawaiian Islands, he volunteered to become 17th Marine Depot paymaster and got the assignment. He spent the duration of his service time in Hawaii in support of black Marines serving throughout the Pacific.

The father of six lost his wife Erma 18 years ago. Victor worked for the Veterans' Administration and drove a Yellow Cab in Camden. He has worked recently as a security guard. Hit by a car near his South Woodbury home in 2008, Victor suffered some memory loss and hearing problems and says he could have died.

But when he awoke, the first words out of his mouth were, "Where's my Marine hat?" Browne has worn his new medal to various Woodbury locales including his WHS alma mater and Acme, where he was introduced over the PA system as a celebrity.

"But I don't plan to wear the medal much," he says. Don't bet on it.

