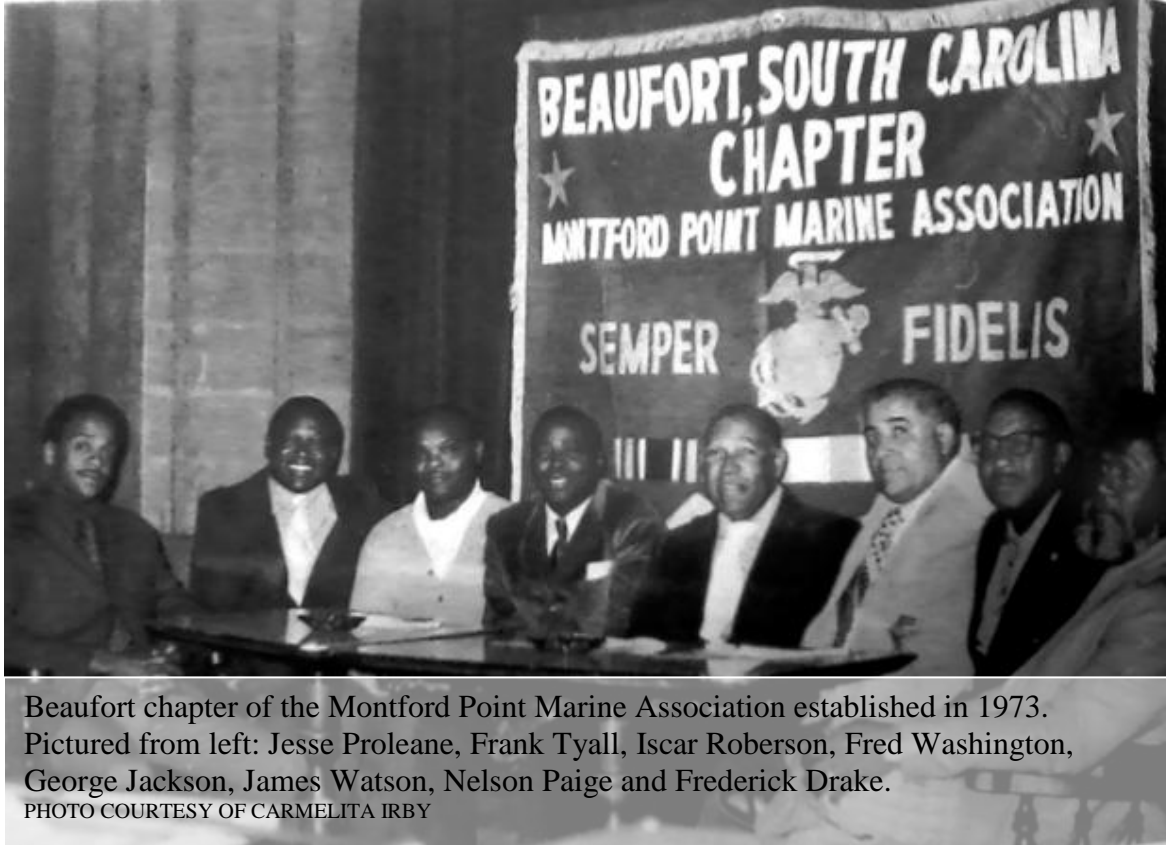




## Montford Point Marine widow to receive husband's Congressional Gold Medal

By MATT McNAB  
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Beaufort chapter of the Montford Point Marine Association established in 1973. Pictured from left: Jesse Proleane, Frank Tyall, Iscar Roberson, Fred Washington, George Jackson, James Watson, Nelson Paige and Frederick Drake.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF CARMELITA IRBY

Growing up, Dr. Tracey Phillips knew about her late grandfather's career as a Marine. She didn't know until recently how historic that career was.

Phillips' grandfather, George Albert Jackson, was one of the first to train at Montford Point in Jacksonville, N.C., where recruit training was set up for the first blacks to serve in the Marine Corps.

Jackson's widow, Ella, 93, will receive a Congressional Gold Medal honoring Jackson's place in history at 11 a.m. Thursday at Helena Place Senior Living in Port Royal. The couple married in 1962; after his death in 1987, she never remarried.

In June 2012, a congressional order authorized Montford Point Marines or their families to receive Congressional Gold Medals -- the highest civilian award issued in the U.S.

Phillips, a Charleston resident, and family friend Carmelita Irby, whose grandfather James Watson was also a Montford Point Marine, learned of their grandfathers' place in history only recently.





Irby received a Congressional Gold Medal on behalf of her grandfather Aug. 22 at the Montford Point Marines Day in Jacksonville. Health concerns prevented Ella Jackson from attending the August ceremony, which coincidentally was her 93rd birthday, Irby said.

George Jackson and James Watson met at Montford Point and became lifelong friends, Irby said. Jackson, a Long Island, N.Y., native, had joined the Corps in June 1942, about three weeks after Montford Point opened for training.

The camp was created after an executive order to prohibit racial discrimination was signed the previous year. Watson, of Durham, N.C., joined the Marine Corps in July 1943.

The two men earned several citations and medals for service in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Both ended their military careers at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island. Watson retired as a staff sergeant in November 1967, and Jackson as a master sergeant in March 1969.

After retirement, Jackson lived in Beaufort and Watson in Port Royal, helping to start a local chapter of the Montford Point Marines Association in the 1970s. Watson died in September 1984, and Jackson died in July 1987. Both are buried in Beaufort National Cemetery.

Irby, a Jacksonville resident and a volunteer at the National Montford Point Marines Museum, began researching the two men, finding their link to the historic site in the museum's records.



Sgt. George Jackson

PHOTO COURTESY OF TRACEY PHILLIP — Photo courtesy of Tracey Phillip

With only a handful of the 20,000 trained at Montford Point still alive, it's common for their children and grandchildren to be unaware of their relatives' place in history, Irby said. As a volunteer, Irby helps many research whether their relatives were original Montford Point Marines.

Irby said people can find out by obtaining a copy of their relative's DD214, the discharge documents issued by the U.S. Department of Defense. The documents can be sent to the local or national Marine Association, or mailed to the museum at Camp Johnson in Jacksonville for verification.

Since receiving the call that her grandmother would receive the Congressional Gold Medal, Phillips said she's started to learn of the role the Montford Point Marines played in helping to end discrimination in the military.

"We knew he had done some things, but he was very quiet about it," she said. "He never bragged about it, but to hear that he had such a place in history is

overwhelming. I cannot wait to see my grandmother receive his award and be honored in such a way. It will be the highlight of her life, next to marrying my grandfather."

