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Few and proud

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Proud to be a Montford

For years, Marines from an all-black unit went unrecognized, even though they played pivotal role in civil-rights movement

BY MARTIN C. IVANK

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It was the sudden sighting of a Marine occupying a nearby island, a Japanese gunnery vessel on the Suigo Island beach where the two men hid. That brought a stark truth to Pvt. Vincent Long during World War II.

Racial segregation in the Marine Corps had barred him, and other black troops from joining the Corps' best-pending combat units.

But Jim Crow rules that barred black Marines to less heroic service roles—cooks, drivers, supply workers and the like—would not spare them from combat's deadly hand.

"There was one guy, I think his name was 'Coke,' who was no further from me to you," Long, 77, recalled of the Battle of

Vincent Long of Hempstead is among the last of the Montford Post Marines, GI's who became the first black Americans to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps. Last year, Congress bestowed the Montford Marines with a Congressional Gold Medal.



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In this April 1943 image provided by the Marine Corps, a platoon of Montford recruits stands at parade rest in New River, N.C.

voice as ignited sigh. "All of a sudden, I realized he wasn't talking anymore. He'd been hit. I never saw him again."

"It was tough going and everything was coming down on us," said Long, of Hampton. "I picked up a Browning automatic machine gun and started shooting like everyone else. Until then, I'd never had anyone's blood on me before."

Long is among the list of the Montford Point Marines, 64 who became the first black Americans to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps.

Barred by racial discrimination from the Corps' training facilities at Parris Island, S.C., and San Diego, some 20,000 black recruits were sent to a segregated boot camp at Montford Point, N.C., between 1942 and the facility's 1947 closing.

Of the thousands who trained at the facility just outside the Corps base at Camp Lejeune, only 200 are believed to have



ON THE COVER The Congressional Gold Medal awarded to Montford Point Marines.

alive, according to James Auerhart Jr., national president of the Montford Point Marine Association, which promotes the legacies of black Marines.

Montford Point recruits participated in some of WWII's most storied battles. Black Marines were on Iwo



In this 1945 image provided by the Marine Corps, Montford Marines are seen in an unarmored location in the Pacific during WWII.

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Recruits broke barriers



Left, segregated troops serve in Guam. Above, Montford Marines in training in North Carolina. Black service members helped spur the early civil-rights movement.

COVER STORY from G4

lines during the bloody Big Baiting on Mount Suribachi. In 1944, a *Time* magazine war correspondent wrote: "The Negro Marines, under fire for the first time, have raised a universal A-G on Saipan."

But Montford Point graduates never gained the prominence held by the Tuskegee Army, black 888th Central Postal Directory, or 888th Central Postal Directory, who were collectively awarded the Congressional Gold Medal — the nation's highest civilian honor — in 2000.

Last year, Congress took a step toward restoring history's oversight when it bestowed the Montford Marines with a Congressional Gold Medal of their own. Long traveled to Washington for the award ceremony, as did Richard F. Warren, 86, of Rochester, and Charles Andrews, 85, of West Los Angeles. The only other Montford Marine to serve in combat on Long Island — Robert Harding, 84, of Riverside — had been too ill to travel.

Warren, who served in Saipan while 115, troops were taking down Japanese soldiers there in the months after Tokyo's WWII surrender, said the war's necessity was "unfolding and profit-filled."

"It was unbelievable," he said. "There were some [Montford] recruits in other units, no doubt. Some had to be recruited, but they were organized as well as in for those that day."

"We had some great troops in America," added Warren, a 1944 draftee who later joined the All Force and rose to the rank of "platoon sergeant before retiring in 1960. He eventually opened a private investigator's business, which he still operates. "But we never thought we would be recognized for our role in integrating the Marine."

At least, a 1941 wartime officer stationed in Chesapeake, Va., credited the Montford troops with closing a path for their 500th Marine (Montford included) — to full-time Marine honor and glory — on Iwo Jima. From Delaware, named John Martin, 86, the first black to serve with a Congressional Marine honor during the Revolutionary War in 1776, he had the most time in the world's military of any man.



Top: WWII troops provided by The Marine Corps' Montford Point Marines and sent with 8888th as a combat unit in the Pacific.

Unknown stories

The Marines of Montford Point are a group of men that history almost forgot. Though they broke racial barriers, their story is not as well known as that of Ross Parks, Jackie Robinson or the famed Tuskegee Army. Yet, the impact of their effort was the same — it altered history.

For that, they were named in the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor, in 2012. Their road to history was fraught with pain and discrimination, but history was not an option.

"The racial prejudice they encountered both in the Marine Corps and in the civilian world combined with a sense that their failure would prevent the Corps from continuing to accept African Americans (presented in a fierce combatant) among the Marines at Montford Point," according to the nonprofit Montford Point Mayor Association, which preserves the legacy of black Marines.

Other notable Montford

■ Sgt. Maj. Gilbert "Ironhorse" Johnson was one of the first and most respected black drill instructors in the Corps. He wrote a letter to President Harry S. Truman, exposing the irony and commitment of the black Marines. The Montford Point facility at Camp Lejeune was renamed in his honor.

■ More than 12,000 Montford recruits saw duty in the South Pacific during World War II, including in Saipan, Iwo Jima, two Iles and Okinawa.

■ Former New York City Mayor David N. Dinkins arrived at Montford Point in 2011. In a 2005 interview, he recalled his Marine Corps experience and his time at Montford Point.

"There was pride in being a Marine," he said, and the training was rigorous. "They used to hand clothes up and hold one to you around them to dry 'em."

■ The camp's first black Marine was Howard F. Perry of Charlotte, N.C.

For more information, go to montfordpointmarines.com

Source: *Montford Point Marine Association*

—TERRY R. HENNER



Charles Anderson of Westbury Great, in service, is one of less than 750 Montford Point Marines still living.



Above, Robert Harding, 64, of Roosevelt, and Richard P. Warren, 66, of Rosovick, right, served with the Montford Point Marines.



But racial attitudes hardened with the birth of the American nation. When Congress established the Marine Corps in 1796, Maj. William Ward Burrows, the first Marine Commandant, instructed a South Carolina recruiter in a letter, saying, "You may see Blacks and Mulat-

os while you recruit, but you cannot color them."

The Army and Navy were employing small numbers of black troops, mostly as porters, cooks and stewards, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered all armed services to admit black re-

cruits in 1942.

But the prospect of integrating the Corps' all-white fighting force spread indignation throughout the chain of command. Major Gen. Thomas Holcomb, then the nation's top Marine, told a Navy staff meeting at Washington in April

1942, "If it were a question of having a Marine Corps of 5,000 whites or 250,000 Negroes, I would rather have the whites." His comments to the Navy Board in January 1942 were even more caustic.

See COVER STORY on G4

Finding recognition

COVER STORY from G1

"Their desire to enter the naval service is largely, I think, to break into a club that doesn't want them."

For black recruits who began arriving when hastily conscripted Marauder units opened Aug. 15, 1943, the hostility was palpable.

"They're usually very open," said Auerbach. "You wouldn't go into restaurants in town, and we couldn't even get into the main line where the whites were allowed."

Auerbach left the Marines in January 1946, but re-enlisted that September for an additional year. He was awarded the Bronze Star during the Korean War, and soon to retire after being honorably discharged in 1972. He worked for the NYPD from 1974 to 1976, then worked at the Kiewit Railway until it closed in 1988.

Though the Marauder recruits adhered to a few era Big Boy Marauder, most were only 4-8 percent of the Corps' 19,700 officers and black. And although blacks make up 22.4 percent of Marines, none has ever reached the rank of lieutenant general, a Marine spokesman said. The country's highest-ranking Marine, three-star Lt. Gen. Willie L. Williams, is scheduled to retire this summer after a 40-year career.

"The Marine Corps is still not there yet," Auerbach said. "I can't say why that is, but there is still a shortage of African-American officers in the Marine Corps."

For many black Americans, the success of the Marines at Montford Point was seen as crucial to the early civil-rights movement. Some Montford recruits had even registered five higher units in other military branches to join, including Gilbert "Hawtuck" Johnson, one of Montford's main reserve drill instructors.

Long, the Brooklyn-born youngest child of a chef and a stay-at-home mother, was drafted in July 1943. The thought of going to war roused him as he boarded a train to Montford Point, he said. He was confident at how easy life would be, giddy at the prospect of shooting a rifle. But combat confirmed him with death's grimest reality. He estimated 3,400 African-Americans were killed in the months-long struggle to wrest Saipan from Japanese troops. One of them was PFC Kenneth J. Tibbs, 39, of Columbus, Ohio, the first black Marine to die in battle. "Kenneth and me got hopped up drinking gin and tonics. First the bet-



Three Black Marines in an undated photo. Hostility against them was palpable early on.

ting if I never get killed," Long said.

"But then it's the real thing."

"You're running onto the beach with there's nothing but bodies. You know you had to get the supplies through because you know they [Marines on the battlefield] could only last so long. But the blood, you never get rid of that feeling."

Long served on Saipan from June 15, 1944, to July 10, 1944. He also served in Okinawa in 1945 and with US troops in southern China until early 1946.

After being honorably discharged in 1946, Long got a job with the urban Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation, and raised a daughter and two sons. He retired in 1980 as a yard master at the MTA's Coney Island Yard.

But it was not until last year, as preparations for the Congressional Gold Medal award were being made, that Long realized history had not fully overlooked the Marauder Point Marines.

Harding had the same realization. He left the Marines and joined the US Navy, retiring from the military in 1967. He then worked as a Turbomec engine-testing control systems for the A-6 Intruder attack jet. He retired in 1992.

"It means a lot to me that we were recognized," Harding said of the award.

Being honored has brought Long a measure of pride.

"Everybody hears about the white units who got the glory, but nobody hears about the guys who supported them," he said. "It makes me feel proud to know I was a Marauder Point Marine."