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William Baxter Gaines

My Father, The Montford Point Marine

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Press



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From The Root DC: Learning to understand a man who was among the first to integrate the Marines.

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On Veteran's Day: My dad, the Marine

By Patrice Gaines



A military photo of Patrice Gaines' father, William B. Gaines Sr. (Pauletta Gaines - Courtesy of Pauletta Gaines) My father, William Baxter Gaines Sr., and I always had a contentious relationship. He didn't talk much to his children about his military experience. He did not hug, read bedtime stories, give out compliments or kiss goodnight. This didn't seem to bother my siblings. I, on the other hand, languished.

I took my father's shunning personally and I left home as a teenager, deciding that I didn't care what he thought of me or whether he ever said, "I love you." But of course it did matter. My bottled-up desperation to be loved exploded again and again.

This was us. On the evening of April 4, 1968, as news spread of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, [riots erupted in the District](#). I was pregnant with my daughter and trying to comprehend bringing a child into a racist, violent world. As I walked into our house in Glenarden, my father said, "Your people are rioting." His comments sparked a loud, heated exchange between us.

I resented his separating himself from other black people. He believed America gave anyone willing to work an opportunity to succeed. He was unrelenting in his patriotism to a country I didn't think deserved it. I thought he didn't understand our struggle for freedom and justice.

How wrong I was.

Just a few weeks ago, more than two decades after my father died, I learned that he had been among the first black men to integrate the Marine Corps, the last branch of the military to integrate. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in 1941, ordered that the Marines to integrate. [And from 1942 to 1949, about 19,000 black men--my father among them--trained at Montford Point in North Carolina.](#)

In this April 1945 image provided by the Marine Corps, Montford Marines train with artillery in New River, North Carolina. Nearly 70 years after the Marine Corps, the last military branch to racially integrate, accepted segregated black units, the Marine Corps' top general is pushing to honor the history of the Montford Point Marines. (AP Photo/United States Marine Corps) (Anonymous - AP) According to news accounts, the black Marines trained under harsh conditions and could only go onto the adjacent [Camp Lejeune](#), where whites trained, when accompanied by a white officer. It was presumed that black Marines were unsuited for combat and they were not allowed to fight beside white Marines until the Korean War. So much has changed since the fights we used to have. My bellowing afro is gone. My fist is no longer clenched. The country I thought hated my father may now posthumously present him with a Congressional Gold Medal. And my father is not here for me to ask him: "Why didn't you sit me down and tell me about what you experienced as a young black soldier at Montford Point?"



I called my father's longtime friend and fellow Marine Charlie Myers to get his perspective. We had not spoken in about a decade.

"We were proud to be Marines, but we were not proud of the jobs we had," said Mr. Myers, who is 86 and lives with his wife, Clara, in Capitol Heights. "We cooked, served tables, made up beds, cleaned rooms, did whatever was needed for white officers. There was nothing wrong with those jobs. But when you were restricted to it, you resented it. I never denied what I did. But I wasn't proud of it."

Let's back up a bit.

My father died in 1989. I remember bawling in the back of the "family" limousine as it left Arlington National Cemetery, my head in my sister Sondra's lap, my body exhausted with sorrow. Even in my haze, I was amazed at how absolute my mourning was for a man I had only recently begun to love.

In the years since that day, my relationship with my father has continued to change, partially because of the way memory paints and repaints the canvas of our past, partially because the grace of time periodically extends to me a new layer of understanding. It is this grace that I am living in at this moment.

Neither I nor my six siblings knew much about my father's military service, but we vaguely remembered him mentioning Montford Point. At a sister's request, I pulled his military papers from my safety deposit box. A thin, yellowing "D-214" form confirmed that indeed he had entered the Marine Corps on October 6, 1946.

Last month the [House voted to award the Montford Point Marines with the Congressional Gold Medal](#), the highest civilian honor given by Congress. A similar bill is pending in the Senate. My father's aging peers, who once believed they had been forgotten by history, are enjoying the late spotlight and I am imagining what my father's smile would look like in the glow of such admiration.

In the Marines, Mr. Myers worked for a general and his wife, he and the wife.

"I had joined the Marine Corps to be a Marine, not a maid," he recalled. "Most of the guys who worked in the general's quarters didn't go out for the physical fitness tests or rifle range exercises, but I did. The general's wife would say, 'You don't have to do that.' I told her I was a Marine first and a steward second."

I know that my father and Mr. Myers were a lot alike. My father was definitely proud of being a Marine. His DD-214 form lists his assignment as "steward" and the "Character of Service" as "Chief Steward." I remember once asking him what he did at work and he answered with one word: "Cook."

"It was rough," Myers said. "But it was a living. Most of us did the best we could do."

Mr. Myers told me that in the late '40s the black Marines were finally allowed to change their "MOS," Military Occupational Specialty. But, he said, the Marine Corps made it difficult, if not impossible, requiring they make the change only when re-enlisting and then they had to re-enter at a lower grade. In this April 1943 image provided by the Marine Corps, a platoon of Montford Marine recruits stand at parade rest in New River, North Carolina. Nearly 70 years after the Marine Corps, the last military branch to racially integrate, accepted segregated black units, the Marine Corps' top general is pushing to honor the history of the Montford Point

"We couldn't afford to do that," he said. "We had families to support."

I am sure that my father, with his seven children, could not afford it. Then Mr. Myers told me something about my father that no one else had ever mentioned.

"He did a lot of uplifting stuff for the blacks in the Corps," Myers said. "He was the only black on the baseball team. We (other black Marines) used to go and watch him play. And you know about his golfing. You didn't have too many blacks playing golf in those years either."

Yes, I knew about my father's golfing. My siblings and I grew up with trophies and silver plated dishes engraved with our father's name on them. We saw newspaper clippings and framed black and white photos of him holding trophies, standing with his white teammates. But I had never heard about him playing baseball. Or at least, I didn't remember any stories.

Certainly when I challenged him about his beliefs during the D.C. riots, I did not think I was talking to a man who was the "first" or "only" black anything. My misconceptions of my father were compounded when I asked Mr. Myers why my father had not worked for white families in the generals' quarters.

"I don't think they thought he was calm enough," Mr. Myers said, laughing. "Your dad ended up being in charge of mess (the cafeteria). He liked to work by himself."

Of course, I was stunned. My memory of my father was as an "Uncle Tom," a "yes" man for the "massa." I never thought about why my father left a lifestyle in the Corps that seemed to suit him so perfectly, a life I believed he fervently loved. Could it be he didn't love it as much as I believed—or in the way I had ascribed to him? Could it be that he stayed 19 years and six months because he had seven children to feed and clothe?

"If I had been out there (in the Corps) doing something I loved I probably would have stayed longer," said Mr. Myers, who served for 20 years.

The words of my father's friend reverberate in my head. How wonderful it would have been to see my father receive a Congressional Gold Medal. I am hoping that this government gives him posthumously what he never received in life; perhaps something even I never gave him: Acknowledgement of all he endured to serve his country.

"We'll feel proud," Mr. Myers said of the possibility. "We want to be looked on the same as anyone else."

Twenty-two years after his death, I am still discovering who S/Sgt (E6) William Baxter Gaines was. Recently, I day-dreamed of him in his Marine Corps blues and me in a flowing chiffon gown, the kind my mother used to wear when they went to the annual Marine Corps Ball.

In my imagination, we danced, my hand resting more easily in my father's palm than it ever has before. I stretch my neck upward, my spine is straight. I try to match his perfect poise. We are two rebels in disguise, waltzing gracefully across smooth terrain. I let him lead me, gladly, out of an imperfect past and toward whatever truth is next.

