

Retired Marine Gunnery Sgt. Percy L. Corke

Marine Retiree Sees Corps Through Grandson's Eyes

By Marine Lance Cpl. Elsa Portillo

CAMP COURTNEY, Okinawa, Japan — As Percy Corke walked on his college campus, he noticed a sharply-dressed Marine who crossed his path. While admiring the lean, confident-looking individual who instantly caught his attention, Corke's eyes were glued to the Marine's uniform.

This seemingly casual encounter planted a seed in the young man's mind that would change his life forever, as he began to wonder how it would feel to be a Marine and strut around in one of those sharp-looking uniforms. "I also liked their toughness and their tenacity to go out and fight," said Corke, revealing his interest in becoming one of America's fighting men.

His gritty-voice resonates with passion, as he recalls the beginning of the next 30 years of his life. His dream of becoming a Marine had to wait for a time when America would allow African-Americans to join the Marine Corps. That time came on June 25, 1941, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt set into motion a change that would have a profound effect on America.

The president created the Fair Employment Practice Commission, which marked a significant change in American history. His actions sparked a move to prohibit government agencies from practicing racial discrimination. African-Americans would now have the opportunity to be a part of a larger working class.

On June 1 of the following year, African-Americans were finally recruited into the Marine Corps. The Corps would now train African-Americans to become one of "the few, the proud, the Marines."

Corke began his journey in April 1943, becoming one of the first 1,500 African-American Marines. Upon enlisting, he was sent to Montford Point, N.C. to undergo recruit training for approximately nine to 10 weeks.

Corke said the first drill instructors were Caucasian Marines. As training continued, the African-American Marines began training their own troops. The African-American troops were not as qualified as the more experienced Marines, but they wanted to be self-sufficient and have a more active role in the training process.

Despite segregation, Corke said he loved the Corps and never blamed it for the racial inequalities thrust upon him.

"The unfair treatment wasn't so much on the part of the Corps as it was from the citizens outside," said Corke, reminiscing on his days starting out as a young Marine.

Corke added that he didn't like having to sit at the back section of restaurants or buses. He continued by saying the Corps should have made Jacksonville, N.C., off limits because of the harsh treatment of African-Americans. According to him, local business owners would take the Montford Point Marines' money for providing services, but treated them at a lower standard.

This treatment was not uncommon, even in the Corps. This was clearly evident when the commanding general of Camp Lejeune spoke to a group of "Montford Pointers" after returning from his deployment to Guadalcanal. Corke recalls the speech vividly...

"I've been fighting through the jungles; fighting day and night. But I didn't realize we were fighting a war till I came back to the United States. And especially tonight when I returned from overseas and found women Marines at Camp Lejeune and you people here at Montford Point wearing our Globe and Anchor. I realized that a grave state of war existed," said Corke, reciting the general's comments that expressed resignation of the changes made in his absence.

Nonetheless, Corke persevered along with his fellow Montford Pointers. These prejudices did not hinder him from doing his best and proving his worth.

When it came time for assignment, the Marine Corps originally appointed Corke as a steward. This was disappointing, as he did not want to become a waiter, baker, or cook for the officers. He had attended a business college before joining the Corps and had received some administrative experience from typing reports during recruit training. Much to his liking, Corke was later reassigned to become an administrative clerk.



Retired Gunnery Sgt. Percy L. Corke, a Montford Point Marine and San Francisco native, stands proudly alongside his grandson who also became a Marine in June 2001. Now a lance corporal, Shawn A. Corke is assigned to Headquarters and Service Company, Headquarters Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, as a motor transportation operator. Courtesy photo

During Corke's 30 years as a Marine, he traveled not only in the States but also overseas. The San Francisco native has traveled to such places as North Carolina, Korea and Guadalcanal on the Solomon Islands, to name a few places.

Throughout his career, Corke witnessed many changes in the Corps firsthand. After World War II, he was assigned to a repatriation unit. He was one of the Marines responsible for the return of fallen comrades to the States for burial.

As he reminisces about this duty, he proudly speaks of a funeral he attended for a Marine, who was the first African-American from a small, South Carolina town to join the Corps.

"I went to the ceremony and when I first pulled in, I looked all around and saw the place loaded with people, mostly white people," Corke explained. "At that moment, while I was wearing my dress blues, I executed one heck of a salute. While I held my salute, everyone and all their differences just seemed to melt away right at that moment."

Corke said this was one of his most memorable moments.

The Corps had changed at the end of World War II and the population of African-Americans was steadily increasing, Corke revealed. According to him, he was a bit surprised when he later heard a general speaking about some African-American Marines serving on Iwo Jima as ammunition technicians.

"The general had said the way those boys were fighting, they just pitched in and fought admirably. They are no longer on trial; they are Marines," said Corke, recalling the general's words.

In 1949, President Harry S. Truman proved this sentiment to be true and created a policy that instituted full integration of African-Americans into military service. The Corps has evolved right along with the country.

Today, Corke looks at the Corps through a new set of eyes - those of his grandson, Shawn A. Corke.

Now a lance corporal, Corke serves as a motor transportation operator with Headquarters and Service Company, Headquarters Battalion, 3rd Marine Division. He is currently reaping the benefits of being a Marine in a time where racial equality now exists in the Corps because of the sacrifices of his grandfather, Percy, and other African-Americans before him.

Lance Cpl. Corke enlisted in the Marine Corps in June 2001. He didn't feel ready for college, but he still wanted to prepare for his future. After a brief conversation with a beloved Montford Pointer, the lad decided he would take on the challenge of walking in his grandfather's footsteps.

With a little help from his grandfather, he found his alternative in the Marine Corps.

"I wasn't ready to go to college yet, and I wanted to prepare to become a highway patrolman when I get out. He gave me a pep talk about how the Marine Corps has good opportunities," the younger Corke revealed. "He told me what it was like back then and how it is today."

Like his grandfather, Corke is also enjoying his career. "My favorite thing about the Marine Corps is the training and the knowledge available to everyone," he said.