



Press



Release

First Black Marines Discuss Life in the Corps and Congressional Gold Medal



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SAN DIEGO — They enlisted in the [U.S. Marine Corps](#) and fought during a time when our country was resistant to racial integration. These brave African Americans trained at Camp Montford Point in the 1940s, paving the way for men and women of all races to serve in the Marine Corps. We spoke with two [Montford Point Marines](#) who live in Oceanside and were recently honored with the nation's highest civilian medal.

They were among America's first black Marines, coming from both the North and South to train in North Carolina when the country was sharply divided along racial lines. "Because of your color, and only because of your color, you had to go to segregated places," said Oscar Culp, retired Master Gunnery Sergeant of the U.S. Marine Corps. "You go to the movies: you had to go upstairs or sit in some corner or someplace. If you wanted to buy food, you had to go around to a little window, and they might get around to taking care of you if you stayed there long enough after they served all the whites," Culp said.

Despite the racial tension, Culp, now 88 yearsold, said he would blaze the trail again if it improved the plight of black people. "Then you think back of the time that you went through, so that you could have the same freedom as everybody else. That was a disaster, really," he said.





Between 1942 and 1949, approximately 20,000 African American men joined the Marine Corps. They got their boot camp training at Montford Point, near Jacksonville, North Carolina. It was a segregated camp of wooden, cardboard huts. They braved a variety of threats, from the swagger sticks of tough drill sergeants to the hazards of snakes, mosquitoes and even bears. In many cases, they were required to face much tougher challenges than their white counterparts who entered the Marine Corps at the same time.

George Mitchel was one of the black men who faced the challenges of Montford Point. "I've had good duty, I've had bad duty, and I've had unpleasant duty," said the retired Master Gunnery Sergeant. Although Mitchell spent 32 years in the Marine Corps and served under 15 generals, he never made the rank of officer.

"Yet I knew how to cope with the bad duty. I knew how to do the good duty well enough to know that, 'This bird over here whose not doing right, hey, give the job to Mitch, he'll get it done.' I said, 'Hey, so that's the way the system works: you don't have to be white to get it done; you can be black and do it, but you don't have room for mistakes,'" Mitchell said.

The Montford Point Marines didn't make many mistakes. They served during a critical point in our history. They fought in some of the bloodiest struggles in the Pacific: Saipan, and Iwo Jima and Okinawa, Japan. Some died, but many others continued to serve in Korea and Vietnam. This summer, 70 years after they entered the Corps, the Montford Point Marines were finally rewarded with the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor.

When Mitchell and Culp enlisted in the Marines in 1942, there were no black officers. Today, there are several black generals in the Corps, and a black commander in chief, President Barack Obama. The Montford Point Marines paved the way for them, as well as women other minorities.

"Every time I see a general or colonel, I just say, 'Well, we did alright. We did alright,'" Oscar Culp said with a smile. Culp and George Mitchell have been in business together for nearly 50 years now. Their [furniture store](#) in Oceanside serves primarily military families.

