



Press



Release

Obituary Announcement

The passing of a great pioneer



Mr. Averitte Wallace Corley

Corporal USMC

11 October 1927 - 3 January 2016

Mr. Corley was a long time member of the Indianapolis Chapter of the Montford Point Marine Association and was a fixture in the Indianapolis Area representing his chapter and the Association at many veteran's events. His loving Daughter, Paula, always made sure he was kept informed of current events and was by his side when he peacefully made his transition.

Funeral details will be published soon as they are announced by the family.



Corley opened doors for Black Marines

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Most people today are not surprised when they see an African-American wearing one of those pristine dress blue Marine Corps uniforms.

Indianapolis resident Averitte Corley, however, remembers when there was no such thing as a Black Marine. He helped make history as one of the Montford Point Marines, the first African-American members of the United States Marine Corps.

"Now you have Marines from different backgrounds serving with each other. A lot of young guys think it's always been that way," said Corley.

"They don't know that many people didn't want us in there." Although the U.S. Army and Navy began to officially





recruit African-Americans during the Civil War in the 1860s, the Marines did not admit minorities until World War II.

During that war in 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an executive order barring segregation in the federal government and the Marines began training its first African-American recruits at Camp Montford Point in North Carolina.

At the time Corley was a student at Crispus Attucks High School. He and a group of friends wanted to socialize at some of the "joints" in the predominantly Black commercial district on Indiana Avenue, most of which would not admit them without proof that they registered with the government as eligible for military service.

After the registration and physicals, Corley's friends backed out, but he decided to accept an invitation to join the Marines, and was bused to Camp Montford Point for training with other Black recruits.

Corley said boot camp was very tough, but social activities provided a positive outlet and foundation for brotherhood among the African-American servicemen.

"We had entertainment, and a football and baseball team. We played against Tuskegee and some of the other colleges," Corley said. "There was an amalgamation of great athletes that came in. So camp wasn't all bad." What was difficult for the young Black Marines to adjust to was blatant discrimination.

"I was still a teenager, and I didn't know much about the South," Corley said. "You had to abide by certain laws and customs down there, and everything was separated by race. Indianapolis wasn't all that good at the time, but it was better than North Carolina." In fact, although the Marines admitted Blacks, some officers attempted to sideline them despite their talent.

"They wanted to use Black Marines mainly for logistics and things of that sort, like they did in the Army," Corley said. "They couldn't do that in the Marine Corps with the way it is structured. When a division of Marines lands on an island in combat, then you're part of combat, regardless. We had the 51st and 52nd defense battalions, which were both exceptional outfits and broke records on firing ranges that haven't been duplicated yet."

According to the Montford Point Marines Association, of the 19,000 African-Americans recruited by the Marines in the '40s, two thirds went overseas in combat support companies or as stewards. Some saw combat in the Pacific as infantrymen, and were trained in communications and other specialized fields. However, most dealt with other dangerous and exhausting jobs.

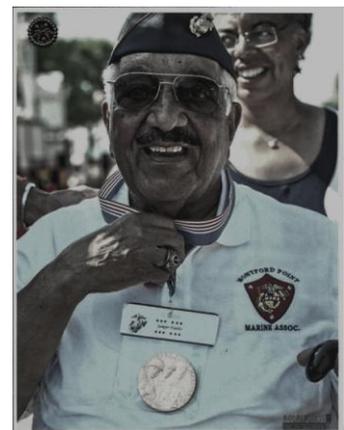
Corley was assigned to guard Japanese prisoners of war on the island of Saipan, and naval installations in Virginia. He remained in the Marine reserves after the war and was honorably discharged in 1959. After serving with the Indianapolis Police Department for 21 years, Corley worked with the postal service.

At age 84, Corley is one of only three surviving original Montford Point Marines from Indianapolis, along with Johnny Washington and Lancaster Price. Washington and Corley are encouraged by the fact that the Marine Corps now has six Black generals.

"Things really changed," Washington said. "We went through a lot back then, but we feel great knowing that we led the way for other Black Marines to come in the Marine Corps and that it is meeting its full potential as an inclusive institution." Corley, like most surviving Montford Point Marines, remains humble about his contributions.

"I didn't do nothing special, I just got old," he said, laughing.

In recent years, the Montford Point Marines have received overdue honors for success in integrating the last segregated branch of the armed forces and their service during the war. In March the Marines were honored during a special Black History Month program at the Roudebush VA Medical Center in Indianapolis. Last month, Congress voted to award them the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor.





By Brandon A. Perry

