



Press



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WWII Marine honored for service in the South Pacific

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GREENBRIER

Even as a teenager, William Davis recognized an opportunity when he saw one.

In 1941, at the age of 16, Davis graduated from I.C. Norcom High School in Portsmouth.

With both parents deceased, and college not an option for him at the time, Davis needed to find employment. The Navy shipyard in Portsmouth was hiring workers because of the threat of war.

"I put my age up to get into the Navy yard because you had to be 18 to get there," recalled Davis, who was granted three deferments from active duty because he worked in a defense-related industry.

A couple years later, Davis - then actually 18 - was drafted.

He reported to Richmond for his physical examination and conscription into the armed forces.

Given his choice of services, he chose the Marine Corps because the uniform impressed him.

Davis was among 20,000 African-Americans who served in the Marine Corps between 1942 and 1949. They were trained and served in segregated units commanded by white officers. Recruits were sent to boot camp

in segregated facilities at Montford Point at Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, N.C.

Davis' drill instructor, Sgt. Jolly, pushed his recruits to their limits. Davis promised himself that when he was through with training, he would reciprocate Jolly's rough treatment of him and his fellow Marines.

"When I got out - graduated - and I got that globe and anchor, I was a full Marine, and my mind was totally changed," said Davis, adding that he hugged Jolly and thanked his sergeant for turning him into a man.





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"I was very proud," Davis recalled. "What he had been doing was developing me. He had been molding me into a Marine. I couldn't accept that in the beginning."

When Davis and his brothers-in-arms left Montford Point, they headed for the South Pacific by way of California. On the way, they stopped at Pearl Harbor where some Marines disembarked.

"When we got to Pearl Harbor, it was a mess. After leaving Pearl Harbor, our first stop was Kwajalein, an island in the South Pacific," said Davis.

On Kwajalein, Davis and other black Marines with the 52nd Battalion had the duty of guarding captured high-ranking Japanese officers. The prisoners believed that personal weakness led to their capture, and according to their warrior code, bushido, they deserved to die.

"They asked us to kill them. We had to guard them to keep them from hurting themselves," said Davis. "Some of them hanged themselves."

The 52nd Defense Battalion then went on to Eniwetok Atoll, where Davis was a machine gunner, to defend the island against the possible return of Japanese forces. They went to Guam for a little rest and relaxation before heading for Saipan.

Davis' unit was assigned to load a ship in preparation to attack Japan. One day before the invasion was to begin, the Marines learned an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. That was Aug. 6, 1945.

"It saved a lot of lives. I'm grateful for that," said Davis. "A lot of people would've been killed."

Davis, who served in the Marines from October 1943 to May 1946, returned to Portsmouth after the war. He earned a bachelor's degree at North Carolina A&T, and managed a Portsmouth ABC store.

He was married to Andora M. Davis for 52 years before her death in 2005. They have one son and two grandchildren.

Recently, Davis, 88, was awarded a bronze replica of the Congressional Gold Medal for his service in the 52nd Defense Battalion with the Montford Point Marines.

The presentation of the award was made by Brig. Gen. William B. Crowe, commander of U.S. Marine Corps Forces Command, during a ceremony May 9 at The Reserve at Greenbrier Retirement Community in Chesapeake.

The Congressional Gold Medal is the highest civilian award bestowed by Congress.

It is awarded to people who have been connected with an achievement that has had an impact on American history and culture - one that is likely to be recognized as a major accomplishment in the recipient's field long after the actual achievement.

The push for surviving members of the Montford Point Marines to receive the Congressional Gold Medal began in 2011. Two awards ceremonies were held in Washington that year, with bronze replicas of the medal presented to the hundreds of surviving Montford Point Marines able to attend.

The Marine Corps Association and the Tawani Foundation have worked together to ensure other veterans not present at the previous ceremonies - like Davis - receive their medals as well.

Davis was joined at the ceremony by other local Montford Point Marine veterans.

"It's a humbling experience, a very humbling experience. It makes me feel good that my peers would take time out of their schedules to honor something that I have done," Davis said.

"I didn't think it was that great, but they seem to think it was," he added. "I'm grateful for it."





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