

Fighting for Freedom

By Steve DiMattia

Every day we pass people in the street and have no idea what glory they may carry. Such is the case with Jacksonville native Alpha Preston Gainous. A dignified, articulate man with a relaxed, friendly manner, Gainous has a welcoming spirit and humble, matter-of-fact attitude that belies the fact that he is a trailblazer in American history.

If you know something about World War II and the evolution of the fight against segregation in the American armed forces, then the garrison cap that he wears on

special occasions might give him away. It is emblazoned with the words, "Original Montford Pointer, 1943-1946" and distinguishes Gainous as one of the first African Americans to serve as a United States Marine.

"I rather have that cap upon my head than the crown of England," said Gainous, 86. "I had to wade through blood and guts for that cap. It opened my mind up and all doors sprang open for me."

Drafted into the Army in 1943 at age 18, Gainous opted to transfer to the Marine Corps for a reason that speaks to the character of the man: "I wanted the best training available."

It was only a year earlier that Gainous' choice even became an option. At that time, the United States military – like the country that it defended – was legally segregated. In 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt, under pressure from Mary McLeod Bethune, A. Phillip Randolph and other African American leaders, issued an executive order prohibiting racial discrimination in the armed forces. It took a Presidential directive in 1942 before African Americans could enlist into the Marines.

Even still, they were forbidden to participate in boot camp with their white counterparts at Paris Island or San Diego and were instead segregated to Montford Point Camp, a satellite of Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, North Carolina.

"They did everything they could to make us fail as marines. As black males we were almost denied of our presence, denied of ourselves," said Gainous. He trained for six months at the camp before being "attached" to the 5th Amphibious Service Battalion aboard the flagship USS Rocky Mount to fight the war in the Marshall Islands. He mostly served aboard ship. "We were 'attached' to those units, but not really in those units, by law. We couldn't actually fight; we had to serve. But at times when you're going to a place where the war is real hot and everybody is dying, then everybody fights. But after that it goes back to the same thing."

He clearly remembers the indignity when the ship's admiral told the media that there were no "colored" Marines in the Marshall Islands campaign. "As an African American there was no such thing as receiving glory," said Gainous. Despite such treatment, Gainous holds no



Alpha Preston Gainous

Photo by Ron Breaker

animosity about those times. "That's just the way it was. I don't have a mind that makes me want to hate anybody. I wouldn't trade my life for all the tea in China. I've had a beautiful life."

After a month in the Marshall Islands, Gainous spent the remainder of his tour in Hawaii serving intelligence officers until his discharge in 1946. "I didn't want to go to war," said Gainous. "But it was better for me that I did. It opened up my horizons. It was only three

years, but that was a lifetime."

Afterwards, Gainous had many notable accomplishments: He graduated from Tuskegee University in 1950 and then worked as a dietician, construction foreman, shipyard boilermaker, blacksmith and machinist. He also built the northwest Jacksonville home where he still lives and had a successful 35-year marriage that produced a daughter (his wife passed in 1986). "Number one, before the war saga, he's a great dad," said Alpha Hay, Gainous' daughter, a teacher at Wolfson High School. "He's my hero."

In 1948 President Harry Truman issued an executive order negating segregation. A year later, Montford Point was deactivated. Twenty thousand African Americans trained there between 1942 and 1949, of which around 150 are still alive.

But the battle is not quite finished. The Montford Point Marine Association is a non-profit that is fighting to gain the same national recognition for the original Montford Pointers that has been bestowed upon their more famous Air Force and Army counterparts, the Tuskegee Airmen and the Buffalo Soldiers: A Congressional Gold Medal. A bill co-sponsored by Rep. Corrine Brown is currently before congress. Gainous has faith that the bill will pass. All his life, he has followed a "universal law" that he credits for his success and which he thinks will operate in this case, too: "Knock and the door shall open, seek and you shall find, ask and you will be given." If not so humble, he might also add, "Look and you shall see great men among us."

For more information about the Montford Point Marines visit the Montford Point Marine Association website: [http:// www.montfordpointmarines.com/index.html](http://www.montfordpointmarines.com/index.html)

***Honoring Jacksonville's
Military Heroes***

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