



Marine who embodied Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream never stopped marching

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Jesse Simmons enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in 1943. Until then, he was ineligible because he was black.

He was sent for basic training at the segregated Montford Point training camp, outside Jacksonville, N.C. The white drill instructors urged the recruits to leave. The recruits couldn't go into town for a meal. They'd be risking their lives in the Jim Crow-era South.

"My dad's favorite saying was 'continue to march.' ... 'If someone spits on you, continue to march,'" daughter Angie Jacobs said. "And that's what he did."

Simmons died Thursday in Fountain Valley at age 92. It was just a few days shy of today's holiday honoring Martin Luther King Jr.

A fixture on the Santa Ana family's dining room wall was a plaque of the civil rights leader with the famous inscription, "I have a dream." Simmons was inspired by King's unwavering faith that change was possible, Jacobs said.

"He, unfortunately, had to live through it, but he got to see the change and see whites and blacks be together," said Jacobs, 53.

Simmons served for 22 years in three conflicts – World War II, Korea and Vietnam. He wanted to fight for his country, despite the prejudices that existed, his daughter said.

In 2012, Simmons and hundreds of other Montford Point Marines received the highest civilian honor, the Congressional Gold Medal.

Simmons was a determined man, not just in his work, but in love. He met his future wife, Barbara, a white woman who worked at the Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune's commissary, in 1968. Biracial marriage was illegal in North Carolina, so the couple went to Washington, D.C., for the weekend and wed.

They soon moved to California, settling in Santa Ana, where they felt there would be more tolerance. Simmons adopted Jacobs and her brother, Preston, from Barbara's previous marriage, and the couple had two more children.

Even though California was more tolerant than the South, Jacobs said it was hard to ignore the stares, racial slurs and inappropriate questions she received as a white girl with a black father.

She recalled when he sought their adoption: "We went in front of the judge and it was an old white judge, and he was like, 'Are you sure?' and he took us aside and asked us if we wanted to live with this black man."

Through it all, her father preached perseverance and positivity.





“No matter what somebody else does, you’re responsible for you and how you treat other people,” Jacobs said he told her. “He didn’t get mad, he didn’t even cuss. He just exuded being loving to your fellow man.”

Bill Woods, a close friend, met Simmons at El Toro Marine Base in 1963 and quickly looked up to him as a mentor. When Woods struggled, either as a Marine or in his marriage, Simmons grounded him.

“He was just the type of person who saw things clearly,” said Woods, president of the San Diego Chapter of Montford Point Marines Association. “If you talked to anyone who knew him, that’s the way they thought about him also.”

After Simmons left the Marines in 1971, he joined the U.S. Postal Service, working as a clerk at the branch on Sunflower Avenue in Santa Ana for 34 years. He retired at age 82, at the insistence of his children. Just before he left, he had to take time off for a diabetic ulcer. He had racked up 1,500 hours of sick time because he never took a day off, even holidays, Jacobs said. “He wouldn’t take a day off unless the apocalypse came,” she said with a laugh.

He never drove, always taking the bus. He lived within walking distance to South Coast Plaza, which turned out to be very convenient.

“Literally, his hobby was shopping for clothes,” Jacobs said. Simmons was always impeccably dressed. He’d wear a suit and tie, even on a trip to the grocery store.

He never owned a pair of jeans.

Jacobs remembered looking outside when she was about 10 to see him mowing the lawn in a three-piece suit.

“It was comical. ... He was not a gardener,” she said. “And it was right after that he hired one.” Even at 89, Simmons had a regular taxi driver who would take him to get all his clothing dry-cleaned and to one of his favorite spots, Men’s Wearhouse.

He eventually dressed in what he deemed casual clothing in his 80s: a short-sleeve button-up shirt (never a T-shirt), slacks and a windbreaker.

Simmons was generous, often stopping and taking money from his sock and handing it to a stranger. He learned the sock trick from the Marines because they were often pick-pocketed, his daughter said.

Jacobs recalled him giving a woman who worked at the supermarket \$100 after hearing about her struggles.

“Nine times out of 10, if he heard you were in trouble, he’d offer you financial assistance,” she said.

A group of Montford Point Marines from the Los Angeles and San Diego chapters will honor Simmons at his funeral Friday. And the Marines Corps Honor Guard will perform a gun salute and a flag-folding ceremony for his family.

In addition to Jacobs, Simmons is survived by daughters Michelle Simmons and Marcella Simmons and son Preston Simmons. His wife, Barbara Simmons, died in 2011.

