

Press



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When Turner Blount stood at Montford Point as a young recruit, the Marine Corps was in a process of transition.

Blount, one of the first African-Americans to be admitted to the Corps, underwent rigorous training, alongside fellow Montford Point Marines under conditions that were, even for basic training, very difficult.

Blount and his fellow Montford Point Marines were the first blacks allowed to enlist in the Marine Corps.

The opportunity came about when President Franklin D. Roosevelt, acting upon the urgings of his wife, Eleanor, signed an executive order that opened the doors to the military for blacks. Men who had long dreamed of wearing the globe and anchor took quick advantage of the opportunity to serve their country in a time of war.

Those Marine recruits faced much hardship. They didn't have the same access to equipment that the white Marines did, nor were their accommodations equivalent. They weren't allowed to travel the roads to training exercises in the same manner as their fellow leathernecks.

The Montford Point recruits were also segregated from their fellow Marines when they went to the USO. Instead, they were relegated to their own USO while only white Marines were welcome at the other one, and confined to one side of Jacksonville's train tracks.

Decades later, Turner Blount, the man who was not allowed to cross the tracks in Jacksonville, served as one of the city's councilmen. Although Blount is now out of politics, he is still active in preserving the memories and traditions of the original Montford Point Marines.

Recently, the commandant honored 116 of the men who broke the Marine color barrier at a breakfast in their honor held in Washington, D.C.

The nation's capitol is just now catching up to what Eastern North Carolina, and Onslow County in particular, has known for many years: Skin color does not make the Marine, although in the case of those original Montford Point pioneers, their skin color did signify a more difficult journey.

A resolution to present the Montford Point Marines with a Congressional Gold Medal was introduced in the House of Representatives this past July. It should pass quickly. While there is a small museum in Onslow County to preserve their past, the courage of these men should be honored nationwide. These were men who faced not only the horrors of war, but also the incivility of their fellow human beings and came through both with dignity and spirits intact.

The Montford Point Marines who are still with us are now in their 80s. It is long past time to accord them this honor. Congress should formally recognize that they truly embody the few and the proud while it's such face-to-face recognition is still possible.
