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Montford Point
Marine Association, Inc.

A Relationship like no other



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Ambassador Theodore R. Britton, Jr
(USA – Retired)



My Marine Corps Relationship

Ambassador Theodore R. Britton, Jr (USA - Retired)

In recent years, I've come to renew my relationship with the U. S. Marine Corps. Still a teenager when I took the oath in early January, 1944, it just didn't occur to me to question the attitudes of its leaders. Being a New Yorker, the harshness of segregation or racial superiority was rarely evident. That was something from down South. I had purposely chosen the Marine Corps over the Army and Navy. The war was on and Marines were in the thick of it. That's where I wanted to be. Being sent to a new camp, Montford Point, rather than the usual Paris Island didn't seem to be any cause for concern. It was only after I arrived in the Pacific, with more time to read Marine Corps regulations than fight the enemy that I began to feel the sense of disdain held towards those of us trained at Montford Point.

We were so proud to be Marines. That's why it hurt to read, among others, Marine Corps Regulations stating that if white and "colored" Marines are assigned to the same unit, a white Marine would always be in charge regardless of the higher ranks of his counterparts. Numerous articles had come to my attention, while at war, showing African American Marines sent to Quantico's Officer Candidate School, only to be returned as failures. After the war, my white Marine friends were accepted in Active duty units while others like me, were made Inactive, just names on some far-away list. A light appeared in 1948 when John Earl Rudder became the first regular Marine officer. But, at the same time, the Corps was promoting a segregated amphibian trucking unit in New York's Harlem, to which I objected. This glorious organization just couldn't seem to change. Semper Fidelis, "Always Faithful", yes, but why not to us? I often thought. On occasion, I saw signs of change, catching my attention, but not generating any renewed affection. Others, the media included, often reminded me of my Marine Corps legacy. When my efforts produced Marine Security Guards at my embassy, I saw a Montford Point Marine in charge of Marines, period, for the first time.

The flame of my youth was gradually brightened as I began to meet with Marines such as former Gunnery Sergeant Linda Sykes of the Montford Point Marine Association, now retired Commandant, General James Conway, and others. I began to see that the Marine Corps had made changes, and were making changes, even promoting a Congressional Gold Medal for our pioneering service at Montford Point. The black general officers and Marine Corps command Sergeants Major were also evidences. A NEW YORK TIMES article about a young Captain Clifford L. Stanley, who suffered tragedy and faced a career end, found the Marine Corps standing by his side, and who eventually became a Major General, caught my attention. When I learned that five black Marines had made the ultimate sacrifice for their fellow Marines in Vietnam, earning the Nation's gratitude, and the Congressional Medal of Honor, I knew that Semper Fi was alive and well in the Corps.

Then came August 26th. 2011. At the Marine Barracks in our Nation's capital, my emotions came under challenge as I watched the number one Marine, Commandant General James F. Amos, and his First Lady, personally welcome me, and others like me, with a hearty handshake, and often a warm embrace. The CMC, as we call him, and the First Lady, whom I call Miss Bonnie, welcomed us, not just to the Barracks, or to their Home, which it is, but in a sense, back to the Marine Corps itself. President Barack Obama even sent his letter of welcome, thanking us for our service some sixty years ago. With the end of that breakfast, and the Commandant's adorning a cap as an Honorary "Montford Point Marine", my reconciliation was complete.

Months have now passed since that memorable morning, and the evening's Sunset Parade which honored us. In his remarks, the CMC cited as his hero, Guess Who? Me! (I suspect he said it because he knows I'm his number one fan, that is, after his little grandson, Charley!) General Amos' has now delivered on his July promise, made in Atlanta, to seek a Congressional Gold Medal for our service, and I might add, emblematic of the Semper Fidelis not always shared with many of us, by some of his predecessors.

That memorable August day left so much for me to think about. On reflection, I have come to appreciate what I gained from the Corps: my first visit to a foreign shore, and the rich education it made available to me. I have learned to appreciate the sincere gratitude for my Montford Point legacy as shown by many who have become outstanding Marines in the intervening years. Master Sergeant Curt Clarke, at the Virginia Beach contingent, recently brought this home to me when I was invited there as speaker for their 236th Marine Corps' Birthday banquet. When I was introduced by the Atlanta Braves in July, at Turner Field, as "Atlanta's Hometown Hero", and a Montford Point Marine, retired Marine Major General Larry Taylor was one of the first people to express his pride as a fellow Marine, not just a fellow Atlantan.

In recent months, I have been invited to speak about the Marine Corps, to active duty and retired Marines, and to many others who appreciated our service. Sometimes, I bemoan my early relationship with the Marine Corps, but always end my speeches with a show of the pride I feel today. And I never lose my sense of compassion for those Marines serving today's battle fronts. Generals Walter Gaskin and Ronald Bailey, and the Commandant himself, quickly come to mind.

In particular though, I have been so impressed and moved by the inspired leadership of Bonnie and Jim Amos, excuse me, I mean the General and Mrs. Amos. They call me part of the family, and I appreciate it, but actually, as Marines, WE'RE ALL FAMILY! I encounter this feeling of family daily as I wear the Marine Corps' insignia on my lapel, or cap. Americans of all colors, races, ethnics, you name it, come over to say: I'm a Marine! Or a simple "Thank you for your service!"

I now proudly wear the Eagle, Globe and Anchor near my heart. And that's where it should be. I begin the New Year, 2012, knowing that my once teen-aged relationship is again a sharing, caring and meaningful one. For this, I thank my friends, Commandant and Mrs. Amos, and many others, with everlasting gratitude. And I can't forget my many fellow Americans who gave me the opportunity to serve, and who helped the Marine Corps to become the caring organization whose relationship I value so much, today. (end)

P. S. – Today, Secretary of the Navy, The Honorable Ray Mabus, personally telephoned me to advise that a new class of naval ships will be announced shortly, the first one to be named: THE USS MONTFORD POINT. As the Biblical saying goes: "My cup runneth over!"

Dated: January 4, 2012.