

Press



Release

Corps saving story of black Marines Politico

By: Charles Hoskinson

Looking back more than 60 years, Korean War veteran Thomas Cork vividly recalls the many slights he encountered as a young black Marine.

They started from the moment he left his hometown of Louisville, Ky., in April 1948 with two other recruits, both white, and being forced to ride in a rail car reserved for blacks, separate from his fellow recruits.

But he recalls with a smile: "I had the meal tickets. I kind of took advantage of that."

A former corporal and retired U.S. Postal Service supervisor, Cork is one of 20,000 Montford Point Marines, the first blacks to serve in the Marine Corps in an organized fashion. They get their name from Montford Point, N.C., the part of sprawling Camp Lejeune where segregated training took place from 1942 until the Marine Corps was integrated in 1949.

With their numbers rapidly disappearing and survivors now in their 80s or older, the Corps is racing to ensure the Montford Point story is preserved. More than 100 of the Montford Point Marines gathered last month at the Marine Barracks in Washington, where they were honored by Commandant Gen. James Amos and interviewed for a living history project that will become a part of the Corps's official record.

"Every Marine, from private to general, should know the history of the Montford Point Marines," said Amos, who's asked Congress to award gold medals to each of the survivors.

The Marine Corps was the last of the armed services to regularly accept black recruits. Historians have identified 13 black Marines from the Revolutionary War, but no others until 1942, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the Corps to allow black Americans to enlist.

Many jumped at the chance, including Theodore Britton of Atlanta, who served on Guadalcanal in World War II and later was the U.S. ambassador to Barbados and Grenada.

"We wanted to get in there and fight," he said. "When we went to war, we were fighting two wars - in the Pacific and on the home front. The first one ended, but the second one continued."

Cork, who left the Corps after the bitter fight at the Chosin Reservoir in late 1950, remembers what life was like for the recruits in nearby Jacksonville, N.C. He was on liberty one night when two white Marines shoved him aside, knocking his uniform cap into the street. When military police arrived, they blamed Cork for the altercation and made him go back to the base because his cap was dirty.

At the time, the only way to get back to Montford Point was on a bus, with only a few seats reserved for blacks. If the bus was full, you had to wait - a slight not all Marines accepted meekly, said Barnett Person, a retired first sergeant from Fort Worth, Texas, who fought in Korea and Vietnam. One day, he recalled, "some of the guys got so mad they just commandeered the bus." "I've read the history. I don't understand it," Amos said. "But this is 2011. Things are different. Things have changed dramatically."

At the barracks breakfast in their honor, many of the Montford Point Marines took note of a big difference - the presence of black officers among the Marines assembled to honor them, including Lt. Gen. Willie Williams, director of the Marine Corps staff. And many posed for pictures with Williams and other black officers. But there were also changes along the way, some small and gradual, others larger. Though Marine commanders resisted the integration of the armed forces ordered by President Harry Truman in 1948, the demands of combat in Korea forced their hands. There also were concerns about how the black Marines were treated in the communities around their bases, which in some cases took decades to ease. Edward Hicks was a star on the Marines' track team at Quantico from 1951 to 1952, until he quit the team and the Corps because the commander wanted to exclude him from meets at Georgetown and American universities, since neither school would allow blacks to compete. He later moved to California and re-enlisted, earning a battlefield commission in Vietnam and retiring as a captain. "I wasn't bitter. I just said, 'You know, you've got to take a stand and move on from here,'" he remembered. Now 81, Hicks still works as a financial planner and looks back on his Marine service with pride. Particularly, Person remembers the actions of one of the Marine Corps's greatest heroes, Lt. Gen. Lewis "Chesty" Puller, who in the twilight of his career in the mid-1950s faced off against local officials in Jacksonville and forced them to stop discriminating against black Marines. Person said Puller put the town off-limits to Marines from Camp Lejeune, strangling the local economy, until some of the town merchants came to surrender. "He said, 'God damn it, go back and tell your mayor that,'" Person recalled. "That's what I liked about old Chesty Puller," Person added, noting that Puller, a Virginian, had put loyalty to the Corps ahead of his Southern roots. "Integration was the best thing that happened to our armed forces," Person said. "It's a hard thing when you come back home and people tell you that you can only sit in one place and eat in one place and who you can socialize with."

Joseph M. Plenzler, APR
Major, US Marines
Public Affairs Officer to the Commandant
[\(703\) 614-2326](tel:7036142326) (work)
[\(202\) 468-4982](tel:2024684982) (cell)
