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Black AmericaWebNews

Marine Corps to Teach Story of its First Blacks

Date: Monday, October 24, 2011, 4:22 am

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OCEANSIDE, Calif. (AP) — Oscar Culp does not like to remember. His mind has erased the harshest details. But the pain still stings for the 87-year-old WWII veteran, who endured boot camp in a snake-infested North Carolina swampland as one of the first blacks admitted to the Marine Corps.

He wipes a tear. Black Marines were barred from being stationed with whites at nearby Camp Lejeune. But what hurt worse, he says, was returning from the battlefield to a homeland that ordered him to sit at the back of the bus and drink out of separate fountains from the white Americans he had just put his life on the line to protect.

"Excuse me," he says, pulling out a handkerchief. "Sometimes we get a little emotional about it."

The story of the first black Marines is a part of history few Americans — and even few Marines — have learned. Unlike the Army's Buffalo Soldiers or the Air Force's Tuskegee Airmen, the Montford Point Marines have never been featured in popular songs or Hollywood films, or recognized nationally.

The Corps' new commandant intends to change that.

Nearly 70 years after becoming the last military branch to accept blacks under orders from President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941, Congress will vote Tuesday on whether to grant the Montford Point Marines the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor.

The Corps up until now has not actively broadcast the painful chapter in the 235-year-old history of an institution that still is largely white, especially in the higher ranks where less than 5 percent of officers are black.

But Commandant Gen. James Amos — whose own 2010 appointment made him the first Marine aviator named to the Corps' top job — has made diversifying the staunchly traditional branch a top priority. Amos has ordered commanders to be more aggressive in recommending qualified black Marines for officer positions. The Corps this summer named the first black general, Maj. Gen. Ronald Bailey, to lead its storied 1st Marine Division at Camp Pendleton.

The Marine Corps also plans to teach all Marines next year about Montford Point, the base near the coastal town of Jacksonville, N.C., that the Corps set up for blacks to keep them separate from white Marines. It operated from 1942 to 1949.

"Every Marine — from private to general — will know the history of those men who crossed the threshold to fight not only the enemy they were soon to know overseas, but the enemy of racism and segregation in their own country," Amos said.

Amos has spent the year lobbying Congress to grant Montford Point Marines the civilian medal, which was given to the Tuskegee airmen in 2006. "It's long overdue," Amos recently told the last remaining Montford Point Marines.

Most of the 19,000 Montford Point Marines have died, their fellow Marines say.

"For the most part, we lost our history purposely," said Culp, who has only a few black-and-white photographs from those days. "They didn't want the world to know our history."

Unlike the Tuskegee pilots — featured in the upcoming Hollywood film "Red Tails" to be released in January — the Montford Point Marines were not officers in the war. The Corps gave those promotions to whites, said University of North Carolina historian Melton McLaurin, whose book "The Marines of Montford Point" is being considered by Amos for his must-read list for Marines.

"The Corps did not want these guys," McLaurin said. "The commandant of the Corps at the time said if he had a choice between 250,000 African Americans — he used the term negroes — and 5,000 whites, he would rather have the whites."

Culp had just graduated from high school in Charlotte, N.C. at 18 when he volunteered to join in 1943 at the height of WWII.

"The Marine Corps was advertised as the most elite military organization, and I wanted to be part of the best to prove, given the chance, that we can do whatever anybody else can do," he said.

He was bused with the other black recruits and dropped at a small shed with a guard who led them into the woods to huts that would serve as their barracks.

The white drill instructors let it be known they did not agree with the new policy forced on the Corps, with some calling it a disgrace.

The Montford Point recruits were not allowed to enter Camp Lejeune unless accompanied by a white officer. The few times they went for a training exercise they had to wait to eat until the white Marines had finished.

"Montford Point was hell really," Culp said. "The water was bad. The barracks were made out of some kind of cardboard. It was cold in the winter. There was ice on the deck where we would sleep."

He saw drill instructors beat those who did not march correctly.

"You just had to take it, take a rifle snapped across your head or be kicked. It didn't happen to me but I saw it happen to other people," Culp said. "I really try to forget about the worst things that happened."

He was sent to the Pacific where his all black ammunition company dodged gunfire as they ferried supplies to the front lines and carried back the dead and wounded. He oversaw the care of white Marines in the brig.

Montford Point Marines participated in the seizure of Okinawa and came under heavy fire at Iwo Jima, winning praise from some white officers for their actions. They were sent to Japan to clean up the ash after the atomic bomb was dropped over Nagasaki.

But after the war, the Corps discharged all but 1,500 of them.

Culp remained, driven by the injustice that "they wanted us to get out."

"Even after the war they wanted it to be lily white again," he said. "They did certain things to try to get the African Americans out and show they were not needed anymore. But we had proven that we could do anything the whites could do and sometimes even better."

Carrel Reavis, 88, was among those who were discharged. But he took a bus from Camp Pendleton across country to Baltimore, Md. where he signed up again.

The Corps continued to resist desegregation even after President Harry S. Truman's 1948 order, historians say. It wasn't until the Korean war that black Marines fought alongside their white counterparts.

Moving up the ranks remained difficult. Reavis stayed the same rank for 10 years while he watched the Corps promote white corporals over him to staff sergeant in a couple of months. "We resented things like that and that's what happened to us," he said, "but who could we go to correct it or stop it? Nobody."

Montford Point Marines pushed each other. Those with college degrees taught the ones without education how to read and write.

"The perseverance we had was all the same," said Reavis, who stayed in the Corps for 21 years and whose oldest son fought as a Marine in Vietnam, losing his left leg. "We were like a brotherhood."

Reavis, who served in Korea, said they formed their own organization in 1965, the Montford Point Marine Association, to preserve their legacy.

Culp left in 1966 as a master gunnery sergeant at Camp Pendleton. He settled in Oceanside, a Pacific coast military town bordering the base, where he opened a furniture..... store with another Montford Point Marine. Their business card reads: "Two people you can trust."

Current Marines and their spouses browse through the store, unaware of the two men's place in history. Their offices are adorned with black-and-white Marine Corps photos, including one of Culp among a sea of white faces at Twenty-Nine Palms Marine base in the 1950s.

He remains close friends with both white and black Marines. Joining the Corps, he says, was his life's "proudest" accomplishment.

"If all of the Montford Point Marines had to go through what they had already gone through again to protect our country, they would," he said.
