



# MPMA

Montford Point  
Marine Association, Inc.

Elmer Bowen Pvt USMC

*Marine Corps Archives & Special  
Collections, Quantico, VA*

"On July 1, 1941, I transferred to Montford Point, NC near Jacksonville where I became a Drill Instructor to carry the 1st and 8th Platoon of colored Marines through boot camp, enjoying this part of my service very much. We had to stay neatly dressed at all times (and that was hard to do in the heat and humidity). We never knew when Eleanor Roosevelt or a congressman or Senator would show up for an inspection and to see how the colored Marines were progressing. These were the first colored men in the Marine Corps. They were eager to learn and our time was enjoyable, if boot camps can be enjoyable."

-Elmer Bowen



# Press



# Release



[Research guide created by the Marine Corps Archives & Special Collections in honor of MPMs etc.](#)

## ***Bowen, Pvt Elmer***

Elmer Bowen, from Chipley, Washington County, FL, joined the Marine Corps in 1941. He was a Drill Instructor at Montford Point with the 51st Composite Defense Battalion, and later an artillery man at Iwo Jima and Cape Gloucester before being discharged in 1946.



In his interview with the Marine Corps History Division, Bowen talks about his experiences as a Montford Point DI in 1942. Please see the descriptions accompanying Parts 1 and 2 of the interview excerpts for more detail.

In the remainder of his interview, Bowen then talks about deployment to American Samoa, and the South Pacific where he joined the 1st Marine Division at Melbourne, Australia, Ballarat, and was involved in the Cape Gloucester campaign. He describes becoming a .50-caliber machine gunner, the conditions (Cape Gloucester was ... "a mudhole... hell on wheels... if there ever was a hell on earth that was one of 'em.. never slept for days, never in dry clothes, up to mud and water to your waist at times...") heavy opposition by the Japanese, injury, sickness, and artillery action. He trained in Hawaii at Camp Tarawa in 1944, and deployed to Iwo Jima with the 2d Battalion Corps Artillery and a crewman with the 155mm Howitzers. He describes the intensity of the operations at Iwo Jima, a 5th Marines ammo dump explosion, fire missions, banzai attacks at Cape Gloucester, infiltrators (Japanese in stolen Marine Corps uniforms), atrocities by the Japanese, and the

flag raising. Bowen returned to Guam then to the United States aboard the USS Hope, which was the first ship to bring POWs out of Japan. He was discharged in 1946.

In this candid interview, Bowen talks about how his parents signed his enlistment papers because he was underage, 6 weeks of recruit training in San Diego, CA, with Platoon 139 in September 1941, and being on liberty during the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

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Bowen describes race relations in the Florida panhandle where he grew up, and the first perceptions of black Marines in the Corps. He talks about the formation of the 23d Marines and subsequently volunteering to be a drill instructor (DI) with a "new outfit" - the 51st Composite Defense Battalion at Montford Point, Camp Lejeune, NC, beginning in 1942. A drill instructor with the 2d and 8th platoons, and describes surprise visits by "some big generals." He says the first black Marines were good Marines, and generally encountered no problems with white Marines, except that "Jacksonville had the meanest MPs," and CMC Gen Holcomb had to send word to Jacksonville that he'd "let them know what would happen if [he] messed with his Marines."

Bowen describes how as a DI he was made to take his platoons on night patrols in the swamps, but instead would march them about a mile out and then hide, as neither the DIs nor the recruits wanted to venture into the snake-infested waters. Upon returning to camp, he would double-time his Marines through the gate: the MPs called him the meanest DI on base and his recruits silently snickered - to his knowledge, their secret was never revealed.

Bowen describes the location of Montford Point, talking the black Marines on liberty, the Montford Point USO and other facilities at the camp. He also talks about how Col. Woods (Col. Samuel A. Woods, Jr., the commanding officer of the 51st) would check up on his Marines to make sure the Marines were not only behaving, but were also being treated as "Marines" by the white Marines. Bowen talks about the perception of the black Marines out in town and in society at the time. Bowen left Montford Point in March 1943 as part of a replacement battalion shipped out to American Samoa and scattered across the South Pacific at the height of World War 2.



### ***Marine Corps Archives & Special Collections, Quantico, VA.***

This is a single folder collection recounting Bowen's experiences in the Marine Corps during World War II highlighting his participation in the Battle of Iwo Jima. Of note also is a roster of the 1st Platoon Colored Marines at Montford Point, North Carolina. The roster is signed by every member of the platoon and provides basic biographical information on each man. Bowen was the drill instructor for the platoon. The collection includes 17 photographs taken on Iwo Jima and at Montford Point.



The Marine Corps Archives & Special Collections is the primary repository for historical papers and audiovisual materials created by, and related to, the United States Marine Corps. For more information on the Marine Corps Archives & Special Collections and to view resources online, visit <http://www.marines.mil/unit/tecom/mcu/grc/archives/Pages/default.aspx> and the Montford Point Marines 1942-1949 Research Guide at <http://guides.grc.usmcu.edu/montford>.

