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*Savannah's last original first black police officer  
and original Montford Point Marine.*



Mr. John A. White

Press



Release

## Savannah's last living original black police officer and Montford Point Marine reflects on his career

*Savannah police Lt. John White guarded King, community and department*

By [Arek Sarkissian II](#)

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Savannah police Lt. John White is quick to show off his scrapbooks full of letters of thanks, praise and prayer from former police chiefs, J. Edgar Hoover and President Ronald Reagan.

White's eyes quickly scan the cellophane-covered pages. Some memories warrant laughter so deep, it shakes the chair where he sits.

But the 85-year-old White - the last surviving member of Savannah's original nine black police officers - isn't hiding his age.

"My legs are hurting me," White says, leaning back in his chair to relieve some pressure. "But I'm still living."

White spent a recent afternoon at his Blackshear neighborhood reflecting on his days patrolling a city where the color of one's skin dictated what level of justice would apply but that eventually evolved to having a black man as interim police chief.

### **From Marine to cop**

White said he was wrapping up a tour as one of the first contemporary [U.S. Marines](#) when his mother submitted his name to become one of the first black officers for Savannah Police Department. Sixty men applied. Those chosen were secretly trained for three months at various locations by judges and lawyers, and were regarded as the most effectively trained law enforcement officers in the city, he said.



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In those days, officers were hired by ethnicity or religious association.

There was a certain number of Jews, Protestants and Germans, he said.

"If one died, they were replaced by the same group," he said.

"We were hired to bring people with a little bit more intelligence into the department."

The chief of Savannah police saw that Miami, Fla., had hired black officers, and he traveled there for guidance, White said.

"He was told you're an SOB if you do and SOB if you don't," he said. "So be a good ... SOB."

Six months later that same chief stated he wished the other 109 officers on the Savannah police force were half as good and effective as the original nine, he said.

The nine still faced adversity. For instance, a black officer couldn't arrest a white person, and a white officer normally would be brought in to assist on any arrest.

### **Tough decisions, tougher times**

Despite the racial climate of the mid-20th century, White said his version of justice saw no color, whether black, white or navy blue.

For example, in 1949, white officers would pick up black women on West Broad Street for "their intermediate entertainment," he said.

Two officers caught a colleague and a woman in the act, and her husband asked why the officers had his wife.

"Those two officers beat that man, and they carried him to a charity hospital and brought him back to headquarters," he said. "That's when officers said, 'We need to kill that (expletive).'"

"I reached around and grabbed my gun from the back and made him and his five friends get down on the ground because I was going to kill all five. I had five bullets for them and one for me. I was going to do it and kill myself."

After being begged to withdraw his weapon, White and the other officers swore not to tell the public of the incident, and a group of officers involved later resigned.

White was commended by former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover for the arrest of a black preacher wanted for the murder of five men.

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"He was, at night, was up to nightmarish activity," White said of the preacher, who was later put to death by electric chair in Florida.

"He'd say, 'John, I don't want to kill you, but I need the money,' White recalled. "Bill, I don't want to kill you ..."

Hoover had put the man on a most-wanted list, and White located him at a home at 39th Street and Ogeechee Road. The FBI agent in charge told White to search the suspect. He was supposed to be armed with two .45-caliber handguns.

"I reached over to grab either side of him and felt metal," White said. "He reached back and said, 'Sir, please don't kill me.'

"They were two metal braces on his legs. He didn't have a gun."

White also was Martin Luther King Jr.'s bodyguard when he visited Savannah.

"He was supposed to be killed here," he said. "But two weeks later, he was killed up in Memphis."

White said his career ended in the mid-80s after decades of stress became too much.

"There were many nights I was the only supervisor in this community," he said. "I made decisions that were real graphic for the benefit of this city."

His retirement brought on commendations from senators and President Ronald Reagan in 1984. In light of his retirement, White was promoted from sergeant to lieutenant.

### **A cop's cop**

Veteran Savannah officers clearly recalled White's tireless police work through the years. Former Chief David Gellatly referred to White as 'a real policeman's policeman.'

"He is a rock. He loved law enforcement and our community," Gellatly said. "He was a man who when he gave instructions of what needed to be done, people realized it was a highly competent officer giving them - that was a huge accomplishment."

Savannah-Chatham interim Chief Willie Lovett said he was supervised by White after joining the department in 1973.

"In those days, sergeants were like God," Lovett said. "When I came on, you didn't bother the sergeant. You didn't call the sergeant for everything."

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"But Sgt. White was willing to share."

White's excellence in police work extended to the use of his service weapon, but ended at the gun range, Lovett said.

"When it was time to go to the range, man, he couldn't hit a target," Lovett said with a chuckle. "But when it came down to it he never missed.

"We'd always tease him about it: He couldn't hit a target, but he'd always hit someone in the way."

Lovett said one of his core lessons in police management was taught by White.

"No police agency is going to be successful without the help of the community it serves," he said. "That's the way he carried himself. He would always listen. It doesn't hurt to always listen, even if you don't believe it."

White said he had no problem offering more wisdom to today's police officers.

"Learn and listen," he said. "It will help them later in life. Have an open mind, a listening ear and still tone. You can't blow up every time someone says something to you.

"When you come to work, leave the prejudice at home."

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