

Montford Point Marine Tells Story of His Lifelong Dedication to the Corps

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Tommie Moore sat down at the desk where he did his accounting, switched on the lamp and pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. He fished around in the left breast pocket of his tennis shirt and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, shaking one halfway out of the pack and placing it to his lips.

Nearly sixty years ago Moore could have been witnessed performing a similar routine -- not behind a desk in the sanctuary of his own accounting business, but in a bunker or behind a machine gun in the tropics.

Moore is a Montford Point Marine. He is one of the first African Americans to enlist in the Corps and participated in the island-hopping campaigns in the Pacific Ocean during World War II.

He is part of a fading breed of patriotic men, long past their status as active duty Marines, but who continue their mission to pass on the legacy of his brethren who fought for a nation that at a time shunned them.

Today, he runs his business out of Savannah, Ga., his hometown. But back then he did not have the slightest idea where he might be today or if he would even be around.

He enlisted near the end of 1942, three months after the Marine Corps first accepted African Americans into their ranks. He went to basic training at Camp Montford Point, now Marine Corps Camp Johnson, named after Gilbert "Hashmark" Johnson, one of six of the first black drill instructors.

Looking toward the future, he knew in his mind he already beat the odds -- that what white people in his neighborhood told him during his childhood was wrong.

"When I was a kid, there was a man named Felter, who owned a service station in our neighborhood," said Moore. "One day, I saw him in his dress blue uniform and I was in awe. Now I've seen the Sailor and the army uniform, but when I saw this -- I knew I wanted to wear it. I asked him, 'What kind of suit is that,' and he told me it was the Marine Corps'. I said, 'When I get to be a big boy, I want to join the Marines.' But he said, 'You can't get in. They don't take colored boys.' That's when I definitely knew I wanted to join."

During his teen years, Moore's uncle -- a mortician, thought that Moore would be a good candidate for mortician's school. But seeking a challenge, he told his uncle to "Let the dead bury the dead."

He finally decided to go to boot camp and was extremely disappointed to find that white people were going to train them. He suffered through bathroom scrubbing sessions with a toothbrush, constant harassment and incessant badgering.

"Boot camp was a rough period," said Moore. "And I thought with the white drill instructors it would be a little more than rough, but it wasn't. I think we were trained the same as whites or anyone else."

Moore was one of only a few hundred African Americans who enlisted that first year. They made a sacrifice to their country, which brought them and the entire African American people to a higher level of equality in the military. It wasn't easy though.

Although his accomplishments were monumental enough as he was and is one of the first black men to graduate Marine boot camp, his biggest challenge lay ahead on a deployment to the warring Pacific region.

"I was so "doggone" scared," said Moore. "Planes were attacking ships and sinking them all around us. We were riding toward Guadalcanal on an amphibious landing craft loaded with 55-gallon drums of gasoline, when it got hit and exploded. We were only about a city block from the beach so we didn't have far to swim. We jumped from the boat and swam through some fire burning on top of the water. I got burnt a bit and that's all. We just wanted to get to the beach."



When Moore and his comrades from the small black detachment of the 1st Marine Division made it to the beach head, they found no safe haven there. But according to him, their minds were set solely on getting there and getting out alive from that first battle on Guadalcanal.

But he and Marines like him received little or no recognition for their contributions.

“The moon was very bright in the pacific," he said. “We suffered bombing raids two to three times a night and sometimes the Japanese would come out of the jungle. We would have to jump out of our tents and run into our fox holes. I had to use my rifle a couple of times.

“The thing that hurt my tour most was that we didn't get any coverage," said Moore. "It's a funny thing. I was an only child and I usually got what I wanted. The depression didn't effect my family much and neither did segregation. My grandmother worked at a sugar refinery, my father was a merchant seaman and my mother stayed home with me. But when I joined the Marine Corps and got out in the world, I saw it."

It being segregation. Despite the many difficulties Moore and his comrades often made the best of their situation.

While in the Pacific they enjoyed down time amidst all of the bomb dropping. When the subjects of the British ruled islands fled, they left some of their possessions, including their livestock.

“With all of the Japanese soldiers and natives of the island, there were also cows and chickens,” said Moore. “Sometimes we would butcher a cow, skin it and make steaks. It didn't last but a couple of days, but we all had a great time while it did.”

The great times are what Moore remembers of his enlisted days. Now that the Corps has changed for the better, giving equal opportunity to all races and genders, Moore is able to see what he and his fellow Montford Point Marines have accomplished for service members.

At age 76, Moore continues to make contributions to the military as guest speaker for Parris Island's 215th Marine Corps Ball and as the first black District Commander for the American Legion in Savannah. And with an entire wall of recent military awards from various veteran outfits like the Non-Commissioned Officers' Association and American Legion, Moore stays true to the Corps.

“Overall, I think blacks advanced in the Marine Corps more than any other branch of service,” said Moore. “Equality was rare when I was in, but the military is better now, whether you're black or white.”