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W.E. Clark III, photographed in his home in Lynchburg, was one of a group of about 20,000 Marines trained at Montford Point, at Camp Lejune, who were recently recognized as the initial surge of African-American Marines who broke a major military color barrier.

W. E. Clark III
WWII Marine Victorious

Press



Release

In battle to break color barrier, WWII Marine victorious

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W.E. Clark III did not have a long career in the military — he was drafted into the Marines in 1945 after the fighting in World War II, and was out in late 1946. His service wasn't distinguished by valor in battle or extensive travel — he only went overseas once, for a week, and no combat was involved. Clark doesn't count himself a hero or really anything special. But as one of a group of about 20,000 Marines trained at Montford Point, at Camp Lejune, Clark is finally being recognized as one face in the initial surge of African American Marines who broke a major military color barrier.

Clark last weekend attended a parade in Washington, D.C. to pay tribute to the Marines, and said it was nice to have recognition after all the years since he's been out of the military. "I accepted the whole thing with pride," Clark said. "I felt happy to rub shoulders with other Marines." Montford Point was established in 1942, when then-President Franklin Roosevelt gave African Americans the opportunity to serve in the Marines, albeit at the segregated camp. Clark said Marines endured an underdeveloped camp, with little more than dilapidated huts left over from the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Drafted straight out of high school in 1945, Clark said he was already used to the racism he would face going to a camp where most of the officers were white. One defining experience in his brief time in the Marines, Clark said, came when a mess hall lieutenant confronted a group that included Clark, saying he didn't like the way they were interacting with each other. "It was 'you people' this, and 'you people' that. That hit me down in here," Clark said pointing to his heart. He knew the expression on his face conveyed his displeasure, though he didn't say anything when the officer asked if he took exception to the rebuke. But the officer insisted, and Clark said "I had to tell him the truth. 'No sir, I didn't like it.' And what did I say that for?" "What are you going to do about it," was the reply, and Clark laughed when he recalled his next words — "Nothing now, sir."

The officer challenged Clark to a fight, though Clark was the bigger man. "We put the gloves on ... and that little fella, he beat the (heck) out of me," Clark laughed. But his friends who watched from the shadows said Clark put a whipping on the other man. Whoever won the match, Clark said, the result was something completely unexpected. "I don't believe that the fight that we had convinced him of anything, but I think he understood the passion behind it, and we got along quite well (after that)," Clark said. "That 'you people' ... I don't think he used that again on the base." Of his time in the Marines, Clark said "It made a man out of me, because I was a boy."

Efforts have been under way to award all of the Montford Point Marines a collective Congressional Gold Medal. Bills were introduced in the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives in 2009, but no votes have been taken on them. Clark said that recognition may be too much to hope for, but if he were allowed to be part of that group, "That would mean an awful lot to me, for the simple reason that something finally paid off." But he said his emotions are mixed on the issue. "When people ask about the Marine Corps ... I don't feel like I did any heroic thing. So why should I be looking for a hero's welcome, in a sense," Clark asked. But he said he finally came to the conclusion that a medal is not as much the issue as recognition. "I don't think the hero's welcome is as (important) as being appreciated." And that appreciation was more than evident last weekend, Clark said, as he hobnobbed with Marines of all colors, met some of the first platoon of Montford Point Marines, and saw families overjoyed that their loved ones were getting recognition. And that made the event worth it.

"The fact that somebody finally recognized me — and I'm talking about as a whole," Clark said, "Somebody finally recognized that my presence was worthy. That you were not afraid to touch my skin."
"It was a together feeling."