

The Montford Point Marines

By DAVID F. WINKLER

The first major battle in the Civil War, the First Battle of Bull Run, included a Marine battalion of 12 officers and 336 enlisted men in the federal ranks. As with their Army brethren, the Marines, most of whom were recently recruited, did not fare well on July 21, 1861. Forty-four Marines were left dead, wounded or captured on the battlefield. None of the Marines who fought 150 years ago at Manassas, Va., were African Americans.

Eventually, with the Emancipation Proclamation, the northern objective moved beyond reunification to the end of the institution of slavery. However, though the eventual outcome of the war would lead to this lofty goal, barriers remained in place and others would be built to deny equality among the races.

In the case of the Marines, congressional regulations passed in 1798 specifically forbade “Blacks” or “Indians” from enlisting. Not hamstrung by such regulations, the Army and Navy filled their ranks with tens of thousands of black and Indian Soldiers and Sailors during the Civil War.

On the eve of World War II, the Marines still refused to enlist blacks. At a Navy General Board meeting convened in April 1941 to discuss expansion of the Corps, the commandant, Maj. Gen. Thomas Holcomb, said: “If it were a question of having a Marine Corps of 5,000 whites or 250,000 Negroes, I would rather have the whites.”

However, responding to demands made by Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters President A. Philip Randolph and other African-American leaders that the government and the growing defense industry cease job discrimination against blacks, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941, that had a consequence of forcing the Marines to enlist African-Americans. With America at war following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the recruitment of black Marines began on June 1, 1942.

Gilbert “Hashmark” Johnson and Edgar R. Huff would be among the first to enlist. They were sent to “Camp Montford Point” at Jacksonville, N.C., where prefabricated barracks and other structures were being built to house 2,000 blacks who were recruited to form the 51st Defense Battalion.

Initially, the drill instructors were white. Black recruits had their service papers stamped “Colored” and could not travel to nearby Camp Lejeune unless accompanied by a white Marine. But the insistence on racially

segregated units in a way proved beneficial to Johnson, Huff and six others who were quickly promoted to become drill instructors, and in April 1943 took over the reins of the eight platoons then in training.

By that time, the nation’s manpower procurement policies had changed and the Marines were now receiving thousands of black draftees. In addition to creating an additional Defense Battalion to provide defenses for captured Pacific islands, blacks would be assigned to stevedore and ammunition-handling companies and go ashore on D-Days at Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Peleliu, Iwo Jima and Okinawa to provide critical logistical support.

Reading reports of the 3d Marine Ammunition Company at Saipan, new Marine Corps Commandant Lt. Gen. Alexander Vandegrift observed: “The Negro Marines are no longer on trial. They are Marines, period.”

In all, 19,168 African-Americans would see service with the Marines during the war.

On Nov. 10, 1945, one of Montford Point’s graduates, Frederick C. Branch, earned a commission as a second lieutenant and would serve during the Korean War. Huff, on the other hand, would remain a noncommissioned officer and rise to become the first black to attain the rank of sergeant major, fighting both in Korea and Vietnam.

Following President Harry S. Truman’s Executive Order 9981 that ordered an end to segregation in the military, Camp Montford Point closed and black recruits were sent to Parris Island, S.C., or San Diego for basic training.

Montford Point still exists. Renamed in 1974 as Camp Gilbert H. Johnson, the facility hosts Marine Corps Combat Service Support Schools as part of the Camp Lejeune complex. In 1965, a reunion of approximately 400 Montford Point graduates led to the formation of the Montford Point Marine Association, which presently has 36 chapters dedicated to preserving the legacy of the first black Marines.

On July 7, Rep. Corrine Brown, D-Fla., introduced a resolution proposing to grant the Congressional Gold Medal to the Montford Point Marines. ■

Source: Bernard C. Nalty, The Right To Fight: African-American Marines in World War II, History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1995.

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