

# Seventy Years Later, Pioneering Black Marines Honored

By **Matthew Hay Brown**, The Baltimore Sun

*10:08 p.m. EDT, June 10, 2012*

When the train full of Marine recruits from Baltimore reached Washington, the blacks were made to move to the back. At boot camp in North Carolina, they were forbidden to step onto **Camp Lejeune** without a white escort.

But the worst of it, Howard "Chappie" Williams says, came when training was over. It was the height of **World War II**, and these first black Marines were kept from the fight.

"A lot of good talent was lost as a result of that," said Williams, who drove a truck in an ammunition company during the war. "A lot of men's lives could have been saved had it not been for the warped concept that America had at that time."

Now, seven decades after President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the Marines — the last whites-only branch of the military — to accept African-Americans, Williams and other pioneers are being recognized for their service.

The Montford Point Marines, named for the segregated camp near Lejeune where they trained, have been featured in books and documentaries. The Navy has named a new troop-landing ship the USNS Montford Point.

And this month, those who are still alive will gather in Washington to receive the **Congressional Gold Medal**, the nation's highest civilian honor.

"Every Marine from private to general will know the history of those men who ... fought not only the enemy they were soon to know overseas, but the enemy of racism and segregation in their own country," Gen. James F. Amos, the commandant of the Marine Corps, said after Congress approved the award last year. "My promise to you is that your story will not be forgotten."

William Foreman Sr., one of a handful of Montford Point Marines in the Baltimore area, called the attention "long overdue."

"We fought a dual war," said Foreman, 87, of **Catonsville**. "We should get the same recognition as the other members of the armed forces."

Montford Point Marines say that recognition has been slow in coming.

"I think they were trying to get us all to die first," said Charles Wells, 86.

**The Army** and the Navy had accepted black soldiers and sailors into their ranks since the Civil War. But in 1941, as civil rights leaders pressured Roosevelt to integrate all of the armed services, then-Marine Corps commandant Maj. Gen. Thomas Holcomb objected.

"If it were a question of having a Marine Corps of 5,000 whites or 250,000 Negroes," he said, "I would rather have the whites."

Holcomb's opposition notwithstanding, Roosevelt issued an executive order on June 25, 1941, prohibiting racial discrimination by the armed services, and a year later the first recruits arrived at the new boot camp for black Marines at Montford Point.

Wells, who trained at the camp on the North Carolina coast in 1944, remembers a mosquito-infested outpost in woods populated by snakes and bears.

"They fenced it in to keep the wild animals from eating us while we slept," the Gywnn Oak man said.

Lejeune, where the white recruits trained, had permanent barracks and paved streets. Montford Point was constructed with particle-board huts and mud tracks. The camp's white commanders arrived in the morning and left at night.

"That was the norm at that time," said Foreman. "We had a divided country. The whites were in one section, the blacks were in the other section. ..."

"The guys from the North were the ones that suffered mostly. They weren't used to it."

Foreman arrived at Montford Point during the spring of 1943, as the drill instructor corps was changing from the whites who opened the camp to the blacks who were among its first graduates.

"The black drill instructors were harder on us than the white ones," Foreman remembered. "They wanted to make us the cream of the crop. ... You wouldn't think the human body could handle that sort of torture."

But when the Montford Point Marines completed boot camp, they were assigned to support roles. Foreman and Wells spent the duration of the war in Hawaii, packing supplies for troops in combat.

In that way, retired University of North Carolina, Wilmington historian Melton A. McLaurin says, the Marines were following the lead of the other branches.

"With the 20th century and the rise of de jure racial segregation, the Army adopted a policy of basically putting their black units into service work," said McLaurin, author of "The Marines of Montford Point: America's First Black Marines."

"The Marines were doing essentially what everybody else did," he said.

Williams did see action. His ammunition company was tasked with retrieving misfired shells on Kwajalein, Okinawa, Saipan and other islands that had been taken by other Marines. On some, they would run into Japanese soldiers who still were fighting.

The United States won the war in the Pacific. But Williams, 87, of **Randallstown**, says an integrated force would have been stronger.

"I'll tell you, a lot of guys paid the price because of segregation," he said. "The Japanese knew no color, no nothing. They wanted to kill, kill, and that was their focus."

"But the American concept was 'Black guys, go here; white guys, over there.' And you could stand back and see where you had opportunities to provide protection and leadership to possibly protect people. But that was crossing a line."

Williams says relations among black and white Marines varied by individual.

"My relationship with some of the combat whites was beautiful," he said. "We were brothers in arms. Slept together, we stole food together, we did everything."

But after the war, he says, the black Marines "were almost shooed out" of the service.

"There was never any recognition of your combat service, your meritorious service," he said. "When we would read in the papers a Naval letter of commendation or a presidential unit citation, we never did get that. And we supported those units."

He added: "You cannot win a battle unless you have logistics. I don't care who is providing it, whether it's black, white, Chinese whatever. No infantry is going to win unless he can be supported with petrol and ammo and food."

The Montford Point Marines say they did benefit from their time in the corps. Williams attended **Virginia State University** on the GI Bill and became a schoolteacher; he would retire from the Baltimore City Public Schools as director of instructional equipment.

Wells joined and eventually ran the family printing business. Foreman worked for the federal government.

Being a Marine, Foreman said, gave him the experience of "working together and feeling a passion for humankind." Wells spoke of the discipline it instilled.

Williams said the Montford Point Marines lived a kind of "dual life."

"You know, we love the Marine Corps," he said. "But we understand the segregated conditions in which we had to live."

McLaurin, the historian, said the first black Marines — like the **Tuskegee Airmen** and the African-American Army soldiers who fought in Italy during World War II — helped make the eventual integration of the military possible.

President Harry Truman ended segregation in the military by executive order in 1948. In Korea two years later, black and white soldiers fought side by side in integrated units. The first black Marines to fight there were alumni of Montford Point.

"Certainly they did a lot to convince both officers in the Marine Corps and the general public that African-Americans could come into the military and contribute a tremendous amount," McLaurin said. "They made that contribution of helping change the majority opinion about the role of African-Americans in the military and in the larger society."