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HOME OF THE ORIGINAL MONTFORD POINT MARINES

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Press Release

Montford Point Marines Honored In Jacksonville

Last month, the National Montford Point Marine Association held their annual convention in Jacksonville with special events to honor the first African Americans in the Marine Corp.

By Jared Brumbaugh Public Radio East

“Each year, we lose our original Montford Pointers.”

Johnny Young Jr. is the President of the Montford Point Marine Association Chapter 10 in Jacksonville. He helped organize events during the national convention to honor the Montford Point Marines.

“Original Montford Pointers are in the ages of 91 through 95, 96 years old. So the gifting ceremony and for them to see the monument completed was something of great significance.”

The four-day meet up started with a gifting ceremony at Lejeune Memorial Gardens where responsibility of maintaining the Montford Point Memorial was transferred to the Department of the Navy. Commanding General of the II Marine Expeditionary Force Lt. General Robert Hedelund.

“For our Corps most precious resource isn’t the planes, the tanks or any piece of equipment. It’s our nation’s sons and daughters all coming from different backgrounds, different regions, different heritage, but each of which has earned the title Marine.”

The Montford Point Memorial, on Lejeune Blvd., took seven years to complete and was dedicated in 2016.



President of the Montford Point Marine Association Forest Spencer transfers responsibility of the Montford Point Memorial to Commanding General of the II Marine Expeditionary Force Lt. General Robert Hedelund on July 25, 2018. Credit G. Taylor/National Montford Point Marine Association

The centerpiece of the memorial is a 15-foot bronze statue of a Montford Point Marine, an M1A1 anti-aircraft gun and a “Wall of Heroes.”

The story of the Montford Point Marines starts in 1942. The United States was involved in World War II and there was a sudden need for jobs in the defense industry. President Roosevelt issued an executive order that gave African Americans the opportunity to enlist into the Marine Corp, the last branch of the Armed Services to accept African Americans. One of the first men to sign up when he was just 17 was Edwin Fizer. He’s now 93 years old.

“The United States Marine Corp previous to my signing up was an all-white organization, never before had they had any African-Americans in it.

And therefore, they were not prepared for us so I had to wait several weeks for them to find a place for us to train.”



93-year-old Edwin Fizer, an original Montford Point Marine, speaking during the monument dedication ceremony. Credit G. Taylor/National Montford Point Marine Association

The first black Marines were sent to boot camp at Camp Montford Point in Jacksonville. Many of the recruits didn’t know they were being sent to a segregated training camp.

“At that time, the n-word was very popular in America, and so consequently, we heard it a lot. And all that did was harden our resolve.”

Recruits at Montford Point were not allowed to go to nearby Camp Lejeune unless a white officer accompanied them. 92-year-old Robert Hammond, one of the first African American Corpsman sent to Camp Montford Point, says Jacksonville wasn’t safe for black marines either.

“If a black marine went out on liberty in town, he was spit on, people would spit on him, where did you get that uniform? They kind of harassed those men. And they just wouldn’t, they were just treated mean.”

During the early years at Camp Montford Point, white drill instructors were in charge of training young recruits. That changed over time as African American leaders like Sergeant Major Edgar Huff and Sergeant Major “Hashmark” Johnson were put in positions of authority.

“And my drill instructor was one of first men of color that was taught to train us.”

93 year-old Vaughn Whitworth, a North Carolina native, was drafted into the Marine Corp in 1943. He says his drill instructor was taught by Sergeant Major Huff and Sergeant Major Johnson.

“They had instructed and told them that the Marine Corps has said we could not do the job. So they were extremely tough on us, much more so than the ones who trained them in order to prove that we could do the job.”

Montford Pointers were trained in support roles like cooking and supplying ammunition. They were also taught hand-to-hand combat and how to defend themselves with knives because at first Montford Pointers weren’t allowed to have guns.

“Our basic duties, to begin with, was not to fight. It was to take the necessary supplies to the front lines. Food, ammunition, whatever and bring the dead and wounded back.”

Whitworth, who was assigned to an ammunition depot, says their non-combat role changed after they proved themselves in the Battle of Saipan in 1944.

“We literally had to defend ourselves, you know, from snipers, things of that sort. So I think it changed at that time, and the top brass changed their minds as to what we could do and what we could not do.”

Montford Point Marines were involved in other battles in the Pacific, including the capture of Iwo Jima from the Japanese in 1945. It wasn’t until three years later that President Truman signed an executive order abandoning segregation in the military. In total, about 20,000 African Americans were trained at Camp Montford Point during the 1940s.



Two Montford Point Marines received the Congressional Gold Metal during the four-day convention. The Association posthumously awarded ten gold metals to family members of Montford Pointers. *Credit G. Taylor/National Montford Point Marine Association*

To recognize their contributions, a ceremony was held last month to honor two Montford Point Marines with the Congressional Gold metal. The Association posthumously awarded ten gold metals to family members of Montford Pointers. President of the local Montford Point Chapter Johnny Young Jr. says he hopes to educate young marines on the role Montford Pointers played in paving the way for future black Marines.

“So this is an opportunity for them to say thank you to those who came before them. And it’s an opportunity for us as staff MCOs, different generation than original Montford Pointers to say thank you. And at the same time, surprising or not, the Montford Pointers says thank you for recognizing us and our contributions because we thought that you had forgotten about us.”

One of the young marines who attended the national convention is Gunnery Sergeant Louis Bon-Ami.

“You can read something in the books, but you actually are surrounded by those individuals who made that history happen.”

Bon-Ami says he’s inspired by conversations he’s had with some of the Montford Pointers, saying he has a new understanding of the challenges they faced, and a greater appreciation for their ability to persevere.

“That frame of mind to me says to me that I need to take that same type of attitude and carry on. So it’s understanding that I may come against some challenges, some difficulties, and overwhelming odds, but in that, if I have an attitude to achieve and move forward and I’m driven by that, I will succeed. And we can see here and by evidence of me being here in uniform, they succeeded.”

PRE honors the legacy of the Montford Point Marines in a new series called “Montford Point Memories.” We’ll hear from the brave men who were among the first African-Americans to serve in the Marine Corp on Mondays at 7:45 during Morning Edition and at 4:45 during All Things Considered.



The memorial’s centerpiece, a sculpture of a Montford Point Marine ascending a hill, represents the struggle of African American Marines who experienced segregation and discrimination in service. *Credit G. Taylor/National Montford Point Marine Association*