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## Walking the Blood-Stained Pave: The Experiences of African American Marines in the Second World War from Enlistment to Montford Point

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WALKING THE BLOOD-STAINED PAVE: THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN  
AMERICAN MARINES IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
FROM ENLISTMENT TO MONTFORD POINT

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
History

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by  
Daniel Thomas Heng  
May 2020

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Rod Andrew, Committee Chair  
Dr. Abel Bartley  
Dr. Alan Grubb

## ABSTRACT

On June 1, 1942, the United States Marine Corps accepted the enlistment of African American recruits for the first time since the Revolutionary War, ending approximately 159 years of strict prohibition of African American enlistments. Over 19,000 African Americans served in the Marine Corps during the Second World War and are now referred to as the “Montford Point Marines,” named after the segregated camp in North Carolina where they were trained. Though these pioneering men are a pivotal part of Marine Corps history, very little is known or written about them. While this thesis seeks to further the understanding of the events that led to racial integration in the Marine Corps, the main focus is to further the understanding and historical knowledge of the African American men who enlisted for service in the Marine Corps during the Second World War. Using archival documents and oral histories, including never before utilized interviews conducted by Marine Corps field historians in 2011, this thesis seeks to understand who these men were and their experiences from enlistment through training at Montford Point.

## DEDICATION

To the 19,168 African American men who stepped through the gates of Montford Point during the Second World War and earned the title of United States Marine.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first thank my advisor Dr. Rod Andrew, who always encouraged me to “tell the best story you can.” His trust in my abilities and guidance when needed is something I will be forever grateful for. From one Marine to another, *Semper Fidelis*. I would also like to thank Dr. Paul Anderson for giving me the opportunity to study at Clemson University and for his constant encouragement at the most trying times. As I learned early on, one cannot go through graduate school alone. A special thanks must be given to fellow graduate student Luke Ekstrom. Over the last two years Luke has been a trusted sounding board for ideas and an amazing colleague and friend.

Most importantly I must give thanks to my beautiful wife, Toshia. Through a deployment to Afghanistan and several training exercises that took me away, Toshia never failed to remain optimistic even when I found it difficult to do so myself. As self-doubt crept in during my first semester at Clemson, she made sure my chin was up, my spirits were high, and always reminded me that the difficulties could only lead to something great. Her unwavering belief in me gives me the strength to push through every challenge and motivates me to continually better myself. Toshia, I love you and thank you for everything you have done for our family. I hope to one day adequately repay the debt I have accrued.

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These are the brave;  
These men who cast aside old memories  
To walk the bloodstained pave,  
Joining the solemn tide that moves away  
To suffer and to die for freedom  
When their own is yet denied

Sgt. Herbert Shore

## INTRODUCTION

“History abounds in striking narratives of chivalry and heroism, of profound statesmanship and bitter national struggles; but its most glowing pages are those that record proud achievements of patriotic soldiers and sailors in their efforts for supremacy. Sparta had her Thermopylae, Haiti her L’Overture and Dessalines. Scotland had her Bannockburn, and immortal Bruce. The Afro-Americans have legions, who have forever immortalized themselves by their soldierly conduct in defense of human liberty.”<sup>1</sup> Miles V. Lynk wrote these words in 1899 and for the most part they are accurate. However, there is one glaring issue with the statement. While the Afro-American legions may have immortalized themselves in some fashion, history has largely failed to do so.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there was little interest in the history of blacks in America. History was a field dominated by whites in the North who were unconvinced of the importance of African Americans in the country and whites in the South who continued to uphold the same prejudices as their ancestors and refused to recognize the importance of African Americans. Therefore, the history of African Americans was discarded by the professional field of history. It wasn’t until 1916 that black history began to gain traction as a scholarly field of historical study. In 1915, African American historian and Professor Carter Godwin Woodson set the foundation for African American history by founding the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) and the Journal of Negro History (JNH). Despite the

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<sup>1</sup> Miles V. Lynk, *The Black Troopers, or The Daring Heroism of the Negro Soldiers in the Spanish-American War* (New York: AMS Press, 1971), v.

establishment of an academic organization and journal, African American history remained a niche field of study dominated by Woodson, many African American colleagues, and a handful of white historians. The study of African Americans in the U.S. military would remain a niche topic within the already niche and burgeoning field of African American history.<sup>2</sup>

However, prior to establishment of the ASNLH and JNH, there were a few well-educated and ambitious African American men who took it upon themselves to tell the stories of men of color who had worn the cloth of the United States military. William C. Nell, a failed law student turned journalist, is widely considered the first African American historian. His pivotal work, *Services of Colored Americans: In the Wars of 1776 and 1812*, was published in 1851 and his second history, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* was published in 1855. The following 70 years would see just a handful of similar works published by African Americans. William Wells Brown published *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and Fidelity* in 1867. Twenty years later, George Washington Williams published *History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865: Preceded by a Review of the Military Services of Negroes in Ancient and Modern Times*. In 1888, Joseph T. Wilson published *The Black Phalanx: African American Soldiers In The War Of Independence, The War Of 1812, And The Civil War*. Works such as *History of Negro Soldiers in the Spanish-American War and Other Items of Interest* by Edward Austin Johnson and Miles Vanderhurst

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<sup>2</sup> August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and The Historical Profession, 1915-1980* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 100.

Lynk's *The Black Troopers: or, The Daring Heroism of the Negro Soldiers in the Spanish-American War* were quickly published at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War.

From the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century until the mid-1950's, the African American experiences associated with slavery dominated the newly formed field of African American history resulting in very few works about African American military experience being written or published. The mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century saw a small explosion of literature about the role African Americans played in America's wars. Benjamin Quarles published *The Negro in the Civil War* in 1953 and *The Negro in the American Revolution* in 1961. In 1965, James McPherson published *Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt And Acted During The War For The Union*. Two years later in 1967, *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West* written by William H. Leckie was published. While most historical works about African American servicemembers written during and prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century focus on the race's contribution to a war, Leckie's work breaks the mold by telling the story of a particular group of men.

Throughout recent American history there have been a handful of African American military units that have garnered fame through their actions on the battlefield. While these units have official military designations, they are often known only by a nickname. There were the "Buffalo Soldiers" of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiments and 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments of the United States Army. These men earned their fame by patrolling the American frontier and courageously fending off Native Americans who

threatened settlers and villages. There were the Harlem Hellfighters of the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. The Harlem Hellfighters earned their nickname through valiant actions while in combat in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive and the Second Battle of the Marne in World War I. Then there were the Tuskegee Airmen, the first African American pilots in the United States Army Air Corps and patrolled the skies above the Mediterranean and mainland Europe. While the Tuskegee Airmen secured the air above Europe, the Black Panthers of the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion drove across France, Belgium, and Germany with Patton's Third Army and destroying everything in their path. Each of these units have been studied and written about by historians and are well known by history enthusiasts. However, there is one group of African American men that have been overlooked: the Montford Point Marines.

Upon their arrival to the United States Marine Corps Recruit Depot either at San Diego or Parris Island, recruits are given a several hundred-page book called the "Recruit Manual." While it has an official name, recruits are to refer to the "Recruit Manual" as the "Book of Knowledge." Inside the "Book of Knowledge" is everything a recruit is required to know by the end of the 13-week training cycle. Using the book recruits will learn proper preparation and of wear their uniforms, military courtesy, drill, basic military tactics, basic life-saving skills, etc. The "Book of Knowledge" also contains an abbreviated history of the United States Marine Corps. The history mostly contains the names of major battles (such as Belleau Wood and Iwo Jima), names of important Marines (such as the "Grand Old Man of the Marine Corps," Archibald Henderson) and a list of "firsts," (such as the first commandant of the Marine Corps, Samuel Nichols). At

any time throughout recruit training, the Drill Instructor can yell out a question about information found in the “Book of Knowledge” and the platoon of recruits are expected to scream at the top of their lungs, in unison, the correct answer. Several times throughout their training they will hear a Drill Instructor yell, “Who were the first African American Marines?!” To which the recruits will reply, “THE MONTFORD POINT MARINES!!” Beyond the four-word response, the recruits are taught nothing about the Montford Point Marines. The small piece of knowledge will stay with them forever like most of what they learn at the Recruit Depot. But they will never be taught that the Montford Point Marines were enlisted for duty in the Second World War. Unless they do their own research, they will never know the names of a single Montford Point Marine.

The fact is, the Montford Point Marines remain an obscure topic in history and within the institution that organized them. There are few works about them. The two most prominent are *Blacks in the Marine Corps* and *The Marines of Montford Point: America’s First Black Marines*. Published in 1975, *Blacks in the Marine Corps* is a wholly unassuming book written by Chief Historian Henry I. Shaw and Assistant Head of the Reference Section Ralph W. Donnelly. This book was the first publication by the U.S. Marine Corps, or anyone else, to focus solely on African American Marines and units. Originally meant to survey the accomplishments of African American veterans in World War II, meager source material led the authors to include African American exploits from the Korean and Vietnam War as well. Despite the incredible efforts of Mr. Shaw and Mr. Donnelly, and the inclusion of two additional major U.S. wars, *Blacks in the Marine Corps* provides just 83 pages of informative content. *The Marines of Montford Point:*

*America's First Black Marines* is a compilation of oral history interviews conducted by Melton A. McLaurin. While *Blacks in the Marine Corps* offers a look into how the Marine Corps experienced integration, *The Marines of Montford Point* gives readers a first-hand look into the unique circumstances of the first African American Marines, told by the individuals who experienced it. Beyond these two pivotal works, there are few places a person may go to learn more about the Montford Point Marines. The only other significant work that delves into the topic is *The First Black United States Marines: The Men of Montford Point, 1942-1946* by Ronald K. Culp. There are, however, a few memoirs written by Montford Point Marines. By far the most readable is *Assignment in Hell* by Winston De Vergee. There is also *Uncle Sam Must Be Losing the War* by Bill Downey, *The Story of the Ninth Depot Company* by James Ferguson, and *Blacks and Whites Together Through Hell* by Perry Fischer and Brooks Gray.

The purpose of this work is to build an understanding of who the Montford Point Marines were and to detail their experiences before and during their training at Montford Point. The first chapter uses archival documents and other secondary sources to tell the story of how the United States Marine Corps came to integrate its organization. Since the Marine Corps falls under the Department of the Navy, this chapter begins by contrasting the history of African American service in the United States Navy with the history of African American service in the Marine Corps. It goes on to examine the influence of the Selective Service and Training Act of 1940 on the signing of Executive Order 8802, which forced the integration of the Marine Corps. It is followed by an examination of the

Marine Corps attitudes towards integration, specifically that of Commandant Thomas Holcomb.

To tell the stories of the Montford Point Marines, this thesis utilizes interviews conducted by Marine Corps historian Henry I. Shaw, interviews conducted by Dr. Melton McLaurin, and never before utilized interviews conducted by Marine Corps field historians at the Montford Point Marine Association reunion in Washington D.C. in 2011. The second chapter attempts to reveal the lives of the men before their enlistment began. It seeks to understand where the men came from, what their families were like, and how they grew. It seeks to understand their life experiences, their circumstances during the Great Depression in an age of overt and systematic racism. And finally, what motivated them to join the Marine Corps? The third chapter uses the stories told by individual Marines to examine the difficulties and harrowing experiences of travelling into the Deep South. While many Marines came from the South and understood its intricacies, others were first-time visitors and ignorant of the Jim Crow laws that governed life below the Mason-Dixon line. The last chapter focuses on the experience of being at Montford Point. It allows the Marines to inform the reader of their first impressions of the camp and harsh realities of Marine Corps culture. The Marines will also tell the reader about their experiences with the dreaded Marine Corps Drill Instructor and about life after boot camp graduation.

## CHAPTER ONE

### UNTO ALL THINGS THERE IS A TIME<sup>3</sup>

The historical lack of African American inclusion in the United States Marine Corps is stark in comparison to its sister service, the United States Navy. Prior to the American Revolution African Americans, both enslaved and free, were frequently employed on ships as pilots, fishermen, and oceangoing sailors. The long employment history aboard ship made for more welcome attitudes when it became necessary to utilize African Americans as sailors during wartime. Continental naval commanders such as Esek Hopkins and John Paul Jones brought their slaves aboard their ships and naval recruiting officers eagerly accepted the enlistment of blacks who had experience on the high seas.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the American Revolution, African Americans “were able and ordinary seaman, pilots, boatswain’s mates and gunner’s mates” amongst the crews that defended the coasts of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Virginia.<sup>5</sup> They could also be found working the ships of states navies and privateers.

Much like the Continental Marines, following the conclusion of the American Revolutionary War, the Continental Navy was disbanded and all remaining ships were sold by 1785. The United States Navy was reborn when Congress declared in the Naval Act of 1797 “That the President of the United States be and he is hereby empowered,

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<sup>3</sup> The titles of Chapters 1-4 come from the poem “First Epistle To The Peons” by Private First Class Joseph Marvin Gish. The full poem can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> William Weir, *The Encyclopedia of African American Military History* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2004), 27.

<sup>5</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 91.

should he deem it expedient, to cause the frigates *United States*, *Constitution* and *Constellation*, to be manned and employed.”<sup>6</sup> While there was no language included in the act that restricted the recruitment of sailors based on race, by August 1798 Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddart adopted Secretary of War James McHenry’s policy of banning African Americans from enlisting for service in the naval forces. However, this order was issued in the midst of the Quasi-War with France and was ignored by naval officers who continually struggled to obtain a full crew aboard their ships.<sup>7</sup>

During the War of 1812, African Americans made up 10 to 12 percent of the sailors aboard ship. If one were to include African American sailors aboard privateers that number would rise to 16 percent. African Americans fought valiantly in the naval victories on Lake Erie and Lake Champlain. Among the complement of four hundred sailors on Captain Oliver Perry’s Great Lakes Armada, one hundred were African American. However. This did not sit well with the ship’s captain, who complained to Commodore Isaac Chauncey of being sent only African Americans and men with no naval experience. In his reply Commodore Chauncey wrote that African American sailors were “not surpassed by any seamen we have in the fleet and I have yet to learn that the color of a man’s skin or the cut and trimmings of the coat can affect a man’s qualifications or usefulness.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it was Chauncey’s response that sparked a change in Perry’s attitude or (most likely) it was the courage and bravery displayed by black

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<sup>6</sup> Naval Act of 1797, Chapter VII, Section I. <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/5th-congress/session-1/c5s1ch7.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Philip S. Foner, *History of Black Americans: From African to the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1975), 481-482.

<sup>8</sup> Gail Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm* (New York: Random House, 2001), 46.

sailors during Perry's destruction of the British fleet at Put-in-Bay that inspired Perry to reverse course and acknowledge the immense assistance African Americans provided in the great naval victory. Perry even singled out by name Cyrus Tiffany, Jessie Walle, and Abraham Chase as African Americans who distinguished themselves as heroes during the battle.<sup>9</sup>

The policy of recruiting African Americans without restrictions continued until 1839. By this time, acting Secretary of the Navy Isaac Chauncey, the same commodore who openly accepted African Americans on his ship's crew, imposed a quota on the recruitment of African Americans. Bowing to complaints regarding the number of African Americans serving as sailors, Chauncey decided that African Americans would not make up more than 5 percent of the entire United States Navy. However, for increasingly incensed representatives from the South this was still too many. In 1842, Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina not only supported his state's threats to arrest any African American sailor who stepped on South Carolina's shores but also proposed in Congress that African Americans should be barred from naval service except as cooks or servants.<sup>10</sup> Though these measures failed, then Secretary of the Navy Abel P. Upshur assured angry Southern representatives that the United States Navy would uphold the quota policy. However, it is important to note that this policy that ensured the presence of African Americans within naval crews was not done out of any moral consciousness or ideals of human equality. Service afloat was not an attractive venture in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Foner, 487.

<sup>10</sup> Buckley, 59.

Century. Able bodied men found more lucrative employment on dry land while social deviants and outcast with little to no opportunity found solace on the high seas.

Compared to the criminals and drunks who wandered the decks of the United States Navy, well-disciplined and hard-working African Americans were a welcome sight for many Naval commanders. Therefore, the continued acceptance of African Americans was more out of necessity than a recognition of their past contributions.<sup>11</sup> No matter the motive, African Americans would continue to be an integral part of the United States Navy going into the Civil War.

The Civil War offered another challenge in obtaining manpower for the Navy's ships.<sup>12</sup> As was the case with the United States Army, the United States Navy experienced a shortage of manpower due to a significant number of sailors choosing to fight on the side of the Confederacy. In September 1861 the United States Navy saw it necessary to eschew the quota established in 1842 and adopt a policy of recruiting former or recently escaped or freed slaves. This policy was further confirmed on April 30, 1862 when Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles issued an order from the Navy Department that stated, "The large number of persons known as 'contrabands' flocking to the protection of the United States flag affords an opportunity to provide in every department of a ship, especially for boats' crews, acclimated labor. The flag-officers are required to obtain the services of these persons for the country by enlisting them freely in the navy,

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<sup>11</sup> Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength For The Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 26-27.

<sup>12</sup> While African Americans may have served within the Confederate Navy in menial positions there is no documentation to confirm this. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, the use of United States Navy will only refer to the Union Navy.

with their consent, rating them as boys, at eight, nine, or ten dollars per month, and one ration. Let a monthly return be made of the number of this class of persons employed on each vessel under your command.”<sup>13</sup> When the commander of the James River Flotilla Commodore Charles Wilkes sought Welles’s advice on manning his crews, Welles reaffirmed this order by responding, “Fill up the crews with contrabands obtained from Major-General Dix, as there is not an available sailor North.”<sup>14</sup> United States Naval commanders appeared to take no issue with this policy and were more than satisfied with work being done by African American sailors. Admiral David Porter, commander of the Mississippi Squadron, noted that African American sailors “do first-rate” and Rear Admiral S.F. Du Pont, commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron described them as “very useful.”<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the Civil War, the United States Navy remained eager to not only attract African American recruits but also re-enlist them when their required service expired. This resulted in the African American sailors being treated relatively well. Aboard ship there was no segregation and discrimination was kept at a minimum. African American and white sailors worked together in the same department, messed together, and were quartered together. Additionally, African American sailors were excluded from prisoner exchanges. As a result of this treatment, African Americans responded positively and quickly filled the vacant ranks. Of the 118,044 enlistments in the United States Navy during the Civil War, 29,511, or exactly 25 percent, were African American. Further, a

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<sup>13</sup> Leslie H. Fishel, Jr. and Benjamin Quarles, *The Black American: A Documentary History* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1970), 238.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), 229.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

later examination of muster rolls revealed that every naval warship employed African American sailors. There were even ships that were primarily manned by African Americans. The gunboat *Glide* employed a crew of 30 African Americans and 8 whites while the paddle wheeler *Stepping Stones* had a crew of 28 African Americans and 2 whites.

By the war's end, African Americans had distinguished themselves as able fighters on the sea. For their conspicuous gallantry in combat, 4 African American sailors would earn the Navy Medal of Honor. Joachim Pease on the *Kearsage*, Robert Blake on the *Marblehead*, John Lawson on the *Hartford*, and Aaron Anderson on the *Wyandank* all distinguished themselves through heroic acts in the face of enemy fire. There were undoubtedly many other African American sailors who fought courageously and performed their duties admirably in battle but did not receive any official commendation. A total of 49 United States ships had African Americans who were killed, wounded, or captured. African Americans would comprise 800 of the estimated 3,220 United States Navy battle casualties while also suffering an estimated 2,000 deaths due to disease during the U.S. Civil War.<sup>16</sup>

Despite overwhelmingly proving their dependability during U.S. Civil War, the plight of the African American sailor worsened in the coming years. This was apparent in the coming acceptances of African Americans to the U.S. military academies and an increasing acceptance of Jim Crow policies aboard naval ships. While the United States Navy had been historically accepting of African Americans as enlisted crewmen, it had

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 230-232.

held a firm policy of not allowing African Americans to become commissioned officers. With pressure from government and social influences, the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland accepted John Henry Conyers as its first African American midshipman in 1872. Within a year of admission, Conyers had resigned his appointment. The next African American midshipman, Alonzo McClennan, was admitted in September 1873. It took interference from the Secretary of the Navy to save McClennan from dismissal stemming from questionable accusations of misconduct. However, McClennan would resign in March 1874 after two faculty members promised to pay his tuition at any other institution. McClennan's successor, Henry E. Baker, was admitted in September 1874 but would be dismissed the coming November. Baker's experience at the U.S. Naval Academy must have been especially trying considering an officer at one point was forced to brandish his sword in order to protect Baker from his fellow classmates. Only three other African Americans were given appointments to the academy in the 1870's but none ever arrived on campus. There would not be another African American midshipman until after the Second World War.<sup>17</sup>

Attitudes toward segregation aboard ship began to change in the post-Civil War era. Racism was becoming more deeply ingrained in American society resulting in whites refusing to work with African Americans unless there was a clear policy or structure that placed the whites in a superior position to the African Americans. These ideals crept from the general American population on land to the mess halls and bunk rooms of U.S. Navy ships. As white sailors began to refuse to eat or sleep in the vicinity of African American

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<sup>17</sup> Buckley, 120-121.

sailors, tensions began to mount between the races. According to a white sailor who served from 1892 to 1895, “The presence of blacks was a constant source of dissatisfaction which often broke out in bloody fights.”<sup>18</sup> Terrifying incidents which required the forceful protection of African American sailors occurred on the USS *Boston*, *Charleston*, and *Independence*. As a result of growing indignation among white sailors and their outright refusal to follow orders issued by an African American, the Navy during this time began to withhold promotions for African Americans. Over time there would be fewer and fewer African American petty officers which naturally restricted leadership and advancement opportunities. Leadership in the U.S. Navy, adhering to growing racial polarization and Jim Crow practices, also began to concentrate African Americans into specific occupational specialties such as stewards, cooks, and firemen, which further segregated sailors on ship.<sup>19</sup>

By the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, more African American sailors were responsible for serving to the personal needs of white officers or cooking meals for the other white sailors than responsible for manning guns. This did not mean African American sailors were immune from the danger of service at sea. On February 15, 1898 the U.S. battleship *Maine* blew up in the Havana harbor. Of the 260 sailors killed in the explosion, 22 were African American. The first offensive action in the Spanish-American war occurred on May 1, 1898 by Commodore George Dewey’s American squadron at Manila Bay in the Philippine Islands. On Dewey’s flagship, *Olympia*, an African

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<sup>18</sup> Nalty, 80.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 81.

American gunner's mate, John Jordan, was in command of the gun crew that fired the first shots of the battle. Two weeks after the Battle of Santiago, Fireman First Class Robert Penn became the only African American to receive the Navy Medal of Honor. After a gasket blew off a boiler aboard the USS Iowa, Penn balanced himself on a board above the scalding water to extinguish the coal fire that had started.<sup>20</sup>

Wading into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the United States Navy continued to drift further towards the institution of Jim Crow policies aboard its vessels. In December 1907, a fleet of sixteen battleships, split into two squadrons and painted white with red and blue accents to represent the current peacetime, set sail from Hampton Roads, Virginia. The fleet, known as the Great White Fleet, was sent to circumnavigate the globe in order to demonstrate the capabilities of the United States of America and its navy. One of the many outlying purposes of the fleet was to conjure up goodwill with Japan while at the same time intimidating them with the impressive force. A problem quickly arose when it was realized the many of the ships employed Japanese servants to tend to the needs of the ship's officers. Concerned about sabotage, the Navy Department ordered the Japanese servants be replaced by African American sailors. The African American sailors were to be pressed into this service regardless of their previous occupational specialty. The demotion from sailor to servant would incense the men affected and would ultimately boil over into a large physical altercation between African Americans and whites while ported in Cherbourg, France.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 63-71.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 83.

The shift toward employing African American sailors as shipboard servants is not directly related to necessity during the voyage of the Great White Fleet. In the age of steam powered ships, the skills that were required to man a ship with sails was no longer needed. Additionally, the crash course instruction on the intricacies typically given aboard the vessel with sails was instead provided to prospective sailors at recruit depots. The United States Navy needed more men to operate the machinery and modern weapons now used to operate steam-powered warships and room to train them properly. For example, the Navy's first warship, the *Andrew Doria*, required the employment of 130 men whereas the USS *Wyoming*, commissioned in 1912, required a force of 1,063. To obtain the number of recruits required to fill these ships, the United States Navy began to expand their recruiting efforts beyond the states and cities that had a naval tradition. Recruiters ventured into the industrial towns of the eastern states, the highly segregated cities of the South, and the rural farmlands of the Midwest. As the U.S. Navy grew increasingly dependent on young, white volunteers, policies were put in place to reflect their attitudes. Unfortunately, these policies reflected the Jim Crow legislation that was spreading across the nation. As a result, rather than alienate white recruits and sailors, the U.S. Navy began to enlist fewer African Americans, restricted their employment to only a few specialties (typically messman and servants), and segregated them from the white sailors.

While some naval officers turned their backs on African American sailors, others became conflicted between preserving segregation and "being fair to a race that for

generations had produced capable sailors for the fleet.”<sup>22</sup> An idea was proposed to set aside ships to be manned exclusively by African American enlisted crew under the supervision of white officers. Maintaining separate ships by race would be too expensive and therefore this idea never received serious consideration. Even with the outbreak of World War I, the opportunities for African American sailors continued to be restricted to the mess halls and officer dining rooms. While the ranks of the U.S. armed forces swelled, only 6,000 African Americans were serving among the 238,000 enlisted men of the United States Navy.<sup>23</sup>

In the summer of 1919, the United States Navy put in place a policy that barred first time enlistments of African Americans. While this policy did not restrict African American sailors from re-enlisting, many were eligible for retirement and choose to leave the service. Post-war demobilization caused the removal of many African American sailors whose positions didn't need to be filled or could be filled by a white sailor who was retained. By 1932 there were only 441 African American sailors on active duty in the United States Navy. The following year, with the demand for messman and servants increasing, the United States Navy opened enlistment to African American recruits who were only interested in becoming stewards. This policy remained in place until the Second World War, at which time the number of African American stewards and messmen had increased tenfold. Additionally, by 1941 there were only twenty-nine African American sailors who held an occupational specialty outside of messman or

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 84.

steward, and all but six of those men had been called back from retirement to serve in the global conflict.

Referring to the inclusion of African Americans in the United States Marine Corps as a long and exhaustive road would be a misnomer. Prior to 1942, no road existed. At the conception of the United States Marine Corps on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1775 there was no specific guidance on who was to be recruited into the newly formed ranks. The lack of instruction as it pertained to recruitment allowed for the enlistment of a handful of African Americans into the Continental Marines and on the ships of a few state navies. The first African American enlisted into the Continental Marines was a slave by the name of John Martin. Martin, also known as “Keto”, was the slave of William Marshall of Wilmington, Delaware and enlisted without the knowledge of Marshall in April 1776. Besides having earned the distinction of the first African American Continental Marine, Martin may also own the unfortunate distinction of being the first African American Continental Marine to die aboard ship. In October 1777, Martin was serving aboard the Continental brig *Reprisal* when it sank off the Newfoundland Banks and took all but the crew’s cook below with it.<sup>24</sup>

The second African American, Isaac Walker, was enlisted into Captain Robert Mullan’s company of Continental Marines in Philadelphia on August 27, 1776. A third African American identified as “Orange...Negro” on company rolls was enlisted on October 1, 1776. Both remained on Captain Mullan’s muster rolls as of April 1, 1777

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<sup>24</sup> Ralph W. Donnelly and Henry I. Shaw, *Blacks in the Marine Corps* (Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, United States Marine Corps, 1975), ix.

which would make it possible that both participated in the Second Battle of Trenton on January 2, 1777 and the Battle of Princeton on January 3, 1777. In addition to the three African Americans listed on muster and pay rolls at least ten African Americans served as Marines aboard ships serving under the state navies of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. While these are the only African Americans that have been identified and can be confirmed as having served as Marines during the American Revolution it is probable that many more African Americans served but were not identified or mis-identified on the rolls of the Continental Marines and state navies.

Another unknown is the length to which African Americans served as Marines during the American Revolution. How long did these men serve in the ranks of the Continental Marines? Whether they served for several months, several years, or the entire length of the war, their service was forcibly concluded. Within one year of the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783 the Continental Marines were dissolved. In 1794, Congress authorized the construction of six frigates for the newly re-established Navy and included Marine guards in the ships' complements. However, it wasn't until 1797 that Marines were actually enlisted to serve aboard the newly built frigates *Constitution*, *Constellation*, and *United States*. Any hope of African Americans serving as Marines on these ships was quickly quashed. While there was a lack of policy regarding the enlistment of African Americans as Marines in 1776, the Navy set up strict guidelines. In a set of rules governing the enlistment of Marines to serve aboard the *Constellation* issued on March 16, 1798, Secretary of War James McHenry demanded that "No Negro, Mulatto, or

Indian be enlisted...”<sup>25</sup> This policy continued when Congress re-established a separate Marine Corps on July 11, 1798. In a letter to Lieutenant John Hall at Charleston, South Carolina, newly minted Marine Corps Commandant Major William Ward Burrows would write that recruiting officers “can make use of Blacks and Mulattoes while you recruit, but you cannot enlist them.”<sup>26</sup> A policy of prohibiting the enlistment of African Americans into the United States Marine Corps would hold strong for the following 144 years.

The wheels of change in the Marine Corps began to slowly creep forward with the passage of the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940. Signed on September 16, 1940, two sections forbid the discrimination of eligible men for service on the basis of race. A clause in Section 303 states, “Provided, That within the limits of the quota determined under section 4 (b) (section 304 (b) of this appendix) for the subdivision in which he resides, any person, regardless of race or color, between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, shall be afforded an opportunity to volunteer for induction into the land or naval forces of the United States...” A clause in Section 304 states, “Provided, that in the selection and training of men under this Act, and in the interpretation and execution of the provisions of this Act, there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race or color...”<sup>27</sup>

The inclusion of these clauses within the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 should have provided hope to the many African American men who wished to serve

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, ix.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, ix.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Congress. *United States Code: Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, 50a U.S.C. §§ 302-315 Suppl. I.* 1940. Periodical. <https://www.loc.gov/item/uscode1940-005050a003/>.

in the United States armed forces in a time of need and further advance their argument of gaining full citizenship and the civil rights that came with it. However, there were several other clauses within the act that afforded the branches of the armed services an opportunity to reject African American recruits. Included in Section 303, directly after the clause previously mentioned, is a clause that states, “Provided further, That no man shall be inducted for training and service under this Act unless and until he is acceptable to the land or naval forces for such training and service and his physical and mental fitness for such training and service has been satisfactorily determined...”<sup>28</sup>

All men entering the military service as recruits were subject to extensive physical and mental examination to determine their level of fitness for service. The completion of these examinations could result in several outcomes. Most commonly the recruit would be completely cleared to perform the duties prescribed within any occupational specialty in the armed forces. If there were discrepancies found during the examinations, the recruit may have to receive a waiver from an officer or doctor stating that those discrepancies could be overcome or they may be restricted to a certain pool of occupational specialties where it could be determined that their problem would not prevent them from performing their duties. Examples of this would be poor eyesight or inner ear issues that would make it difficult to perform duties within a flying aircraft but would not restrict them from employment as a mechanic or administrative specialist.

The most extreme outcome is the denial of service due to discrepancies discovered during examinations. In these cases, recruits were found to have physical or

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

mental issues that would completely hinder their ability to perform any duties of any occupational specialty. However, while some recruits could convince a doctor or officer to clear them for service after discovery of a physical ailment, it was difficult for doctors or officers to completely fabricate a physical ailment due to their objective nature. On the other hand, mental ailments could be fabricated, test could be created to produce specific outcomes, results could be easily adjusted, or results could be read with an air of subjectivity and prejudice. Evidence of this could be found in a December 26, 1942 Memorandum from the United States Marine Corps Division of Plans and Policies to the Director of the Division of Plans of Policies. With the subject stated as “Colored Personnel”, the Division of Plans and Policies used United States Army statistics from the Selective Service to forecast the level of intelligence expected of African American recruits they may receive. The intelligence groups were broken into five class: Class I Superior, Class II Above Average, Class III Average, Class IV Below Average, and Class V Inferior. The contrast between the white recruits and African American recruits is significant. While 7.6 percent of whites were included in Class I, only 0.6 percent of African Americans were scored this high. At the bottom of the spectrum, just 8.9 percent of whites were considered Class V, while an appalling 47.5 percent of African Americans were considered to have inferior intelligence.<sup>29</sup> A year prior to this memorandum, a committee under the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, tasked with studying the

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<sup>29</sup> Memorandum, Division of Plans and Policies to Director, Division of Plans and Policies, 26 December 1942, subject: Colored Personnel. Reference Section, Director of Marine Corps History and Museum, Washington, D.C. in Morris J. MacGregor and Bernard C. Nalty, Editors, *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents: Vol. VI Blacks in the World War II Naval Establishment* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1977), 420.

inclusion of African Americans in the United States Navy, reported to the Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox that “Under present high standards required of recruits, the indications are that out of every forty Negro applicants, only one would be accepted for general service, whereas approximately 22% of the white race are now accepted.”<sup>30</sup>

The second clause in Section 303 that offered military leaders the opportunity of deny African American recruits stated, “Provided further, that no men shall be inducted for such training and service until adequate provision shall have been made for such shelter, sanitary facilities, water supplies, heating and lighting arrangements, medical care, and hospital accommodations, for such men, as may be determined by the Secretary of War or the Secretary of the Navy, as the case may be, to be essential to public and personal health...”<sup>31</sup> With this clause in place, the branches of the United States Armed Forces could successfully argue that due to the current social situation and Jim Crow policies that had been firmly entrenched on military bases or the civilian areas surrounding them, they could not accept African American recruits due to lack of housing and recreational facilities.<sup>32</sup> They could also argue that building additional structures for bachelor quarters, family housing, mess halls, hygiene facilities, etc. would take resources (money, supplies, men, etc.) that were unavailable due to the national emergency taking place.

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<sup>30</sup> Memorandum, Chief of the Bureau of Navigation to the Chairman, General Board, 22 January 1942, subject: Enlistment of men of the colored race in other than the messman branch in MacGregor and Nalty, 24.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Congress. *United States Code: Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, 50a U.S.C. §§ 302-315 Suppl. 1.* 1940. Periodical. <https://www.loc.gov/item/uscode1940-005050a003/>.

<sup>32</sup> Franklin, 424.

In a radio address on October 16, 1940, Selective Service Registration Day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt told the nation:

“On this day more than sixteen million young Americans are reviving the three-hundred-year-old American custom of the muster. They are obeying that first duty of free citizenship by which, from the earliest colonial times, every able-bodied citizen was subject to the call for service in the national defense. It is a day of deep and purposeful meaning in the lives of all of us. For on this day we Americans proclaim the vitality of our history, the singleness of our will and the unity of our nation.”<sup>33</sup>

It didn't take long for African American leaders to recognize the signs of discrimination in the application of the Selective Training and Service Act. At the annual convention of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a resolution was passed that called on the President, Congress, and all governmental departments to end discrimination based on race. Fortunately, a guest of honor at the convention was First Lady and civil rights proponent Eleanor Roosevelt. Upon hearing of the resolution, Eleanor promised her full support and cooperation. Returning to Washington D.C., Mrs. Roosevelt convinced the President to meet with a delegation of African American leaders and listen to their concerns. On September 27, the President welcomed A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Walter White, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; and T. Arnold Hill of the National Urban League. Also included in the meeting are Navy Secretary Frank Knox and Undersecretary of War Robert Patterson.<sup>34</sup> The small contingent of African American leaders offered the President a memo consisting of seven points they believed

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<sup>33</sup> B.D. Zevin, Editor, *Nothing to Fear: The Selected Addresses of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1932-1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946), 231.

<sup>34</sup> Kenneth Davis, *FDR: The War President, 1940-1943* (New York: Random House, 2000), 200.

were the “minimum essentials in giving Negroes just consideration in the defense program.”<sup>35</sup> Those seven points were:

1. That all available reserve officers be used to train recruits.
2. That black recruits be given the same training as whites.
3. That existing units in the army accept officers and men on the basis of ability and not race.
4. That specialized personnel, such as physicians, dentists, and nurses, be integrated.
5. That responsible African Americans be appointed to draft boards
6. That discrimination be abolished in the navy and air forces.
7. That competent African Americans be appointed as civilian assistants to the secretaries of war and navy.<sup>36</sup>

The meeting ended cordially with a promise from Undersecretary Patterson that the War Department would draft a new policy statement with their insights and suggestions in mind. However, the feelings of goodwill did not last long. On October 9, Press Secretary Steve Early introduced a new statement of policy that was a result of the conference with the three African American leaders. The key phrase in the statement said, “the policy...is not to intermingle colored and white personnel in the same regimental organizations.”<sup>37</sup> The implication of the press conference was that Randolph, White, and Hill agreed with and approved of the policy which led to aggressive charges of treachery from the African American community. Understandably, the three leaders were highly aghast and angered by the “new” policy. A. Philip Randolph, in particular, was determined to act and force the President’s hand.

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<sup>35</sup> Franklin, 425.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 425.

<sup>37</sup> Davis, 201.

Later in the fall of 1940, the Roosevelt administration announced that African Americans would be recruited into the United States Army in proportion to their population in the general public. However, African American soldiers would continue to serve in segregated units and be officered by whites. In October, Colonel B.O. Davis became the first African American to be promoted to Brigadier General. New ROTC units were established at historically black colleges and universities and two prominent African Americans were placed in high profile positions at the Department of War and within the Selective Service. Being so close to the presidential election, it was hard for the African American community to believe that these actions were not politically motivated. For most African Americans, these measures were not enough. While superficial progress was made within the government, African Americans were still being denied jobs within the defense industries. Industrial plants were converted to produce wartime materials and received massive contracts from the United States government that necessitated the hiring of hundreds if not thousands of new employees. Yet, despite the need for labor most plants holding these contracts refused to change their discriminatory hiring practices. African Americans continued to face difficulties in finding employment within the public and private sectors.<sup>38</sup>

In January 1941, A. Philip Randolph “advanced the idea of fifty to one hundred thousand Negroes marching on Washington and demanding that their government do something to insure the employment of Negroes in the defense industries.”<sup>39</sup> For the next

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<sup>38</sup> Franklin, 426.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 426.

six months, African American citizens made plans to attend the march, scheduled for July 1, 1941. Throughout the last three weeks of June, several prominent members of local and national government called on Randolph in an attempt to persuade him to call off the march. In a meeting in New York, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and New York City mayor Fiorello LaGuardia argued that the march would do no good and would perhaps result in reprisals against African Americans across the country. In a reply letter to Secretary Knox, who had joined the line of dissuaders, Randolph was not only unmoved but also invited the Navy Secretary to address the crowd of marchers. Randolph wrote:

Because of your commanding and strategic position, as Secretary of the Navy, in the whole program of national defense, I, in the name of the national negro March-on-Washington Committee for Jobs and Justice in National Defense, wish to request you to address the Rally from the Monument of Abraham Lincoln where a great throng of Negroes from all parts of the country will be gathered...I assure you, Mr. Secretary, the hearts of the Negro people will be grateful to you for your speech on the 'Policy of the Navy Department on the Negroes' Participation and Integration in the Army, Navy, Marine and Air Corps in National Defense."<sup>40</sup>

Finally, President Roosevelt requested the presence of Randolph in the Oval Office. On June 18, 1941, Randolph would successfully fend off Roosevelt's well-known charm and manipulation tactics in a one-on-one conversation with the president. While Roosevelt attempted to engage in small talk and storytelling, Randolph firmly stated his goals of racial equality in the defense plants and armed forces. Roosevelt promised to talk to the heads of the defense plants and tell them that African American workers should be afforded the same rights and opportunities as white workers. This was unsatisfactory for

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<sup>40</sup> Letter, A. Philip Randolph, Director of Negro March-on-Washington Committee, to Secretary Knox, 4 June 1941. Navy and Old Army Branch, Military Archives Division, National Archives, Washington, D.C. in MacGregor and Nalty, 9.

the stoic Randolph who informed President Roosevelt that only an executive order would suffice. A tense back and forth ensued with President Roosevelt questioning the actual number of planned participants and whether the march was going to happen at all while Randolph remained cool and collected. At one point Randolph wryly extended an invitation to the President to speak at the event just as he had done to Secretary Knox. President Roosevelt, growing visibly irritated at not getting his way, suddenly ended the meeting and refused to negotiate any executive order until the march was called off, to which Randolph respectfully declined to do. Fortunately, one of the spectators of this conversation was New York City mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. Sensing the seriousness of the situation and undeniable certainty of the march moving on as planned, LaGuardia politely interrupted and suggested that a solution had to be devised and agreed upon. Roosevelt agreed and instructed LaGuardia and a few others to leave the meeting and work something out.<sup>41</sup>

What the group produced was a rough draft of the executive order Randolph was demanding. After extended mediation between Randolph and Roosevelt, the president acquiesced and assigned an executive assistant to begin drafting the order. Due to Randolph's insistence that he would not call off the march unless he found it to be satisfactory, the executive order went through several rounds of drafts and redrafts over a seven-day period. Randolph's victory was sealed on June 25, 1941, just five days before the scheduled date of the march, when President Roosevelt signed Executive Order No. 8802 that stated:

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<sup>41</sup> Davis, 204-205.

...I do hereby reaffirm the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin, and I do hereby declare that it is the duty of employers and of labor organizations, in furtherance of said policy and of this order, to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin...<sup>42</sup>

Despite Executive Order 8802, many defense plants did not change their employment practices simply because the contracts were signed before the order and contained no clauses related to equitable hiring practices. A similar transition would occur in the United States Marine Corps.

Well prior to the signing of Executive Order 8802, in September 1940, the United States Navy convened a General Board to study the possibility of enlisting African Americans into general service rather than being restricted to service in the messman branch. In the board's initial letter to Secretary Knox, Chairman of the General Board gave the following reasons as to why African Americans should not be enlisted into general service:

(a) Experience of many years has shown clearly that colored men, if enlisted in any other branches than the messman branch and promoted to the position of petty officer, cannot maintain discipline among men of the white race over whom they may be placed by reason of their rating; as a result, teamwork, harmony and ship efficiency are seriously handicapped.

(b) Each recruit is potentially a leading petty officer. It would be a waste of time and effort to recruit and train persons for general service, who by reason of their race and color could not properly and efficiently fill the higher ratings.

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<sup>42</sup> Executive Order 8802 dated June 25, 1941, General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives

(c) There are no separate units (such as submarines, destroyers, etc.) manned exclusively by colored personnel to which colored recruits could be assigned.<sup>43</sup>

While conducting ordinary or daily business the Commandant of the Marine Corps was largely independent of the Department of the Navy. However, in areas such as manpower, budget, policy, and specific areas of military operations, the Commandant of the Marine Corps was by law subordinate to the Secretary of the Navy. Therefore, at this time, the United States Marine Corps policy towards racial integration was dictated by the Department of the Navy and Secretary Knox. This, in a way, made things very simple for the Commandant at the time, Major General Thomas Holcomb.<sup>44</sup> Unless he was called on to testify or requested to provide information or an opinion, Holcomb could simply follow the guidelines and orders made by Secretary Knox. This does not mean Holcomb did not make his feelings on including African Americans into his beloved Corps heard. In a personal letter to Harold E. Thompson of the Northern Philadelphia Voters League dated August 6, 1940, Holcomb explained that African American enlistments in the United States Marine Corps was impractical. The United States Marine Corps was much too small to form segregated units and did not have the infrastructure to support African American recruits, a typical argument after the passage of the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940. When providing his opinion to the Navy General Board in April 1941 Holcomb was more blatant in his response to the question of racial

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<sup>43</sup> Memorandum, Chairman of the General Board for Captain Deyo, 17 September 1940. Operational Archives Branch, Naval History Division, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. in MacGregor and Nalty, 4.

<sup>44</sup> At the time of the signing of Executive Order 8802, Holcomb was a forty-one-year veteran of the United States Marine Corps. Born in 1879 in New Castle Delaware, Holcomb became a second lieutenant in 1900 through his years served in China, the Philippines, France and Cuba before being promoted to Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1936.

integration in the United States Marine Corps. Holcomb opined that African Americans did not have a right to demand entry into the Marine Corps and that “If it were a question of having a Marine Corps of 5,000 whites or 250,000 Negroes” he would rather take the whites.<sup>45</sup>

At the end of December 1941, the committee within the General Board examining the question of full participation within the armed forces produced a majority and minority report to be examined by Secretary Knox. The members of the committee in the majority, which included the sole Marine member Colonel Thomas E. Watson, shared the opinion that no changes need to be made to existing policy despite the passage of Executive Order 8802. In their opinion all service members that fell under the scope of the Department of the Navy were required to be available to serve aboard ship and on land. In this case, it would be much too difficult to maintain segregation on land and sea, in specialized training, and in combat and would ultimately throw off the harmony that currently exist in the services.<sup>46</sup> Essentially, changing policy would rock the boat at a time when teamwork and cooperation is of utmost importance. The only member in disagreement, Addison Walker, Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, wrote the dissenting view. After summarizing the majority viewpoint, Walker offered a very poignant and somewhat philosophical approach to the issue. Walker wrote:

In providing on of the means through which men may have the privilege of fighting and dying for their country, our Navy has a certain obligation to extend that

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<sup>45</sup> Morris J. MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965* (Washington D.C.: Center for Military History, United States Army, 1981), 100.

<sup>46</sup> Memorandum, The Committee to The Secretary of the Navy, 24 December 1941, subject: Full Participation in the Defense Program of all persons, regardless of race, creed, color, or National origin. Operational Archives Branch, Naval History Division, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. in MacGregor and Nalty, 22-27.

privilege to all American citizens who can meet the physical, educational, and intellectual qualifications. A man's right to fight for his country is probably more fundamental than his right to vote. The rights and privileges of individuals, in particular a group representing roughly 10% of the country's population, as is the case with the Negroes, comprise a social force which cannot be ignored by the Navy which has suddenly been thrust by events into the most prominent position of any American institution. To a large degree the Navy owes its very existence to the possibility that clashing social forces may explode into a war between nations. The reconciliation of social friction within our own country, particularly while it is at war, should be of deep concern to the armed services. It should be recognized that the Negro today is not the cowed, humble, childlike person that his American ancestors were. With an emotional fervor, he is demanding equality of opportunity and this demand represents an expanding social force which can prove dangerous for iron clad restrictions unequipped with safety valves.

In weighing the responsibilities and obligations of the Navy there can be no question but what the duty to operate our fleet at the highest degree of effectiveness is paramount. This does not mean, however, that other obligations can be side-stepped if the acceptance of them would not in any way interfere with the first and principal responsibility. The Navy certainly cannot be made a laboratory for social experiment, yet, until it gives careful consideration to the possibilities of setting up some special assignment or rating for a Negro combatant force there does not seem to be justification in answering an emphatic and final "no" to the Negroes' appeal for a chance to serve in some role in addition to messmen.<sup>47</sup>

In the midst of the fervor that followed Pearl Harbor, the reports were not requested by Secretary Knox until January 20, 1942, at which time a hearing to discuss the issue was scheduled by the General Board for January 23. It is at this meeting that committee member Admiral Charles Snyder first referenced in a committee setting how many African Americans could be recruited into the United States Marine Corps. Admiral Snyder stated, "In the first place, 5,000 are to be taken into the naval service, it would seem that possibly the Marine Corps could take care of 20% or 1,000..."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Memorandum, The Committee (Minority member) to The Secretary of the Navy, 31 December 1941, subject: Minority Report on the subject "Full participation in the defense program by all persons, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin." Operational Archives Branch, Naval History Division, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. in MacGregor and Nalty, 29-30.

<sup>48</sup> Hearings before the General Board of the Navy, 1942, Operational Archives Branch, Naval History Division, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. in MacGregor and Nalty, 33.

Attending the hearing as representatives of the Marine Corps were Commandant of the Marine Corps Major General Holcomb and committee member Colonel Watson. Upon request for his opinion by Admiral Snyder, General Holcomb initially deferred to Colonel Watson who would read from a memorandum prepared for the hearing. The report laid out reasons for continued exclusions of African Americans in the Marine Corps. It was stated that the Marine Corps already had already met its personnel requirements, the timeline for training African American non-commissioned officers was unfavorable, and there was already a lack of housing and military equipment. The report also argued that white officers and non-commissioned officers would have to be made available to train African American recruits at a time when none could be spared and that the injection of African Americans in the Marine Corps would do nothing to improve morale that was already high. Upon Colonel Watson's concluding remarks, General Holcomb felt it necessary to reiterate some issues brought up by the memorandum. Holcomb was compelled to first provide a thought on German propaganda that sought to highlight the racial tension in the United States. The Commandant stated, "Personally, I cannot believe that the Germans are ignorant of the fact that one of the principal complaints of the negro outside of his liability to be lynched is that there are certain places he is not allowed to go; and one of them is the Naval Service. Nor can I make myself believe that the Germans would launch this propaganda if they thought they were making available to the

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\*The prospect of accepting 1,000 African Americans in the Marine Corps was first acknowledged by Headquarters Marine Corps in General Board Letter No. 421 Dated January 20, 1942.

service a useful and efficient source of man power.”<sup>49</sup> Clearly, Holcomb believed it was essential to point out that the enemy believed African Americans to be so inefficient as armed service members that it would ultimately benefit the German effort if they were allowed to serve in the United States armed forces. Perhaps Holcomb believed that allowing African Americans to serve in the Naval Service was playing into the hand of the enemy and should be avoided for the sake of American victory.

Holcomb continued, “To take negroes into the Marine Corps at this time or within six months or possibly a year would be absolutely tragic...They are trying to force themselves in...We are now fighting a crucial battle. If we are defeated we must not close our eyes to the fact that once in they will be strengthened in their effort to force themselves into every activity we have.” For Holcomb, allowing African Americans into the Marine Corps was no longer an issue stemming from social upheaval but an ideological battle that must be won or risk losing their grasp on a long-held tradition of victory. Holcomb added, “Don’t forget the colleges are turning out a large number of well-educated negroes. I don’t know how long we will be able to keep them out of the V-7 class.”<sup>50</sup> This comment seems to contradict the argument that African Americans would be unable to handle the mental demands of specialized training for jobs other than messmen.

Nearing the end of the hearing, General Holcomb made a few more statements. General Holcomb reiterated, “I know I speak not only for myself but for all the officers I

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<sup>49</sup> Hearings before the General Board of the Navy, 1942, Operational Archives Branch, Naval History Division, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. in MacGregor and Nalty, 46.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 46-47.

know, that we believe there would be a definite loss of efficiency in the Marine Corps if we had to take negroes...no plan can be made for the employment of the negroes in the Naval Service that will not serve to reduce the efficiency of that service.”<sup>51</sup> The Commandant also wanted to remind the committee “that the negro race has every opportunity now to satisfy its aspiration for combat, in the Army – a very much larger organization than the Navy or Marine Corps – and their desire to enter the naval service is largely, I think, to break into a club that doesn’t want them.”<sup>52</sup> Finally, Holcomb was asked what he would do if he had to accept African Americans, to which he replied, “I don’t want to take another licking; if we have to take them we will give them every type of duty and do that rather than be defeated again.” After this answer he was asked if he would attempt segregation. He replied, “I would not put them in any white unit but I would rather put them in every activity than be licked again.”<sup>53</sup> It is again apparent that General Holcomb viewed the situation as if it were playing out on a physical battlefield. Allowing African Americans into the Marine Corps is comparable to “taking a licking” and if push came to shove General Holcomb would rather offer African Americans every type of duty right off the bat and take one big loss as opposed to several small losses in the form of African Americans slowly continually demanding the opening of more specialties. Competitive and stubborn in his position, General Holcomb was unprepared and unwilling to accept African Americans into the United States Marine Corps. Unfortunately for him, the final decision was out of his hands.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 49.

Shortly after the conclusion of the hearing, Secretary Knox requested that the committee submit a plan for enlisting 5,000 African Americans into the naval service in specialties other than messmen. On February 3, 1942, the General Board sent a memorandum to Secretary Knox that stated, "The General Board regrets that it is unable to comply with that part of the reference (a) which requires submission of a plan for taking into the Navy 5,000 men of the colored race, not in the messman branch."<sup>54</sup> Eleven days later, Secretary Knox sent a memorandum to the Chairman of the General Board Admiral W. R. Sexton to inform him that President Roosevelt was unsatisfied with the board's reply to Knox's request. Knox informed Sexton that it was the President's "opinion that there are additional tasks in the naval establishment to which we could probably assign an additional number of enlisted men who are members of the negro race."<sup>55</sup> By all appearances this was not a suggestion but a polite order by a president eager to have this issue resolved.

On February 18, the Chairman of the General Board requested that the Commandant of the Marine Corps submit a list of duty stations or assignments where African American recruits could be assigned without causing a distraction for the rest of the force. The minimum number that was to be considered was the previously suggested 1,000 men with a maximum of 10% of the entire force. In his reply on February 27, General Holcomb suggested just one location, Marine Barracks, New River, North

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<sup>54</sup> Memorandum, Chairman General Board to Secretary of the Navy, subject: Enlistment of men of colored race in other than messman branch, 3 February 1942. Operational Archives Branch, Naval History Division, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. in MacGregor and Nalty, 64.

<sup>55</sup> Memorandum, Secretary Frank Knox for Admiral W. R. Sexton, 14 February 1942. Operational Archives Branch, Naval History Division, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. in MacGregor and Nalty, 65.

Carolina “in a location where they would be separate from other marines and still have available certain training facilities.”<sup>56</sup> The Commandant included “That the 1,000 negro marines should be organized into a composite battalion, consisting of infantry, antiaircraft artillery, machine guns, 5”/50 caliber guns, and other components necessary to make it a self-sustained unit.”<sup>57</sup> Sensing the inevitable, Headquarters Marine Corps finally accepted the fact that African Americans were going to be included in the upcoming battles of the Second World War. Marine Corps leaders came to the realization that some African American Marines would serve in combat and went to work establishing a training program. It was decided that training would be conducted in an area of New River called Montford Point and \$750,000 was allotted to construct the necessary facilities for the new camp.<sup>58</sup> General Holcomb viewed the selection of the right commanding officer as absolutely crucial. The officer would be given the difficult task of building a unit from the ground floor and maintaining the discipline of its new members. The man chosen was a well-respected native of South Carolina and graduate of The Citadel, Colonel Samuel A. Woods. Throughout his 25 years of experience in the Marine Corps, Woods had served in France, Cuba, China, Dominican Republic, the Philippines, and aboard the naval fleet. The organization of the composite battalion was

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<sup>56</sup> Memorandum, Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps, to Chairman, General Board, 27 February 1942, subject: Enlistment of the colored race in other than messman branch. Operational Archives Branch, Naval History Division, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. in MacGregor and Nalty, 75-76.

\*In comparison, the U.S. Coast Guard, which was to recruit just 150 African Americans, gave the board 16 location suggestions.

\*Marine Barracks would be renamed Camp LeJeune later in the year.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Donnelly and Shaw, 2.

also more clearly established. Upon completion of recruit training, African American Marines would be organized into a composite defense battalion which consisted of seacoast artillery, antiaircraft artillery, infantry, and tanks. The overall purpose of a defense battalion was the overall protection of bases established overseas.

The irony of this decision cannot be overlooked. Despite the military establishment's opinions on the inefficiency of African Americans and their perceived lack of adequate intelligence, the Marine Corps planned to employ these new Marines into artillery, a highly technical field, and infantry, which General Holcomb had previously argued required "more character and a higher degree of morale" than any other specialty.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, the defense battalion was fairly new in practice and one that was ushered in by General Holcomb himself. Though theory of defense battalions had been conceived during the expansion of Marine Corps expeditionary forces and bases after 1898, resources and lack of manpower had kept the Marine Corps from putting it into practice. Upon his promotion to Commandant in 1936, amidst increased tension across the Pacific, Holcomb recognized the importance of protecting Navy and Marine Corps bases strewn across the vast ocean and used everything in his power to obtain the funds and manpower to establish defense battalions at the most vulnerable ones.<sup>60</sup> After all of Holcomb's adamant and consistent discouragement of accepting African

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<sup>59</sup> Hearings before the General Board of the Navy, 1942, Operational Archives Branch, Naval History Division, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. in MacGregor and Nalty, 47.

<sup>60</sup> David J. Ulbrich, *Thomas Holcomb and the Advent of the Marine Corps Defense Battalion 1936-1941* (Quantico; History and Museums Division, Marine Corps University, 2004), 1-19.

Americans, he seemed to be going against his own better judgement in more ways than one.

In a press release doled out to members of the media on April 7, 1942 the Department of the Navy announced that African American volunteers “will be accepted for enlistment for general service in the reserve component of the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Marine Corps, and the U.S. Coast Guard.”<sup>61</sup> The press release informed the public that recruiting would begin when suitable training facilities were constructed and the same entrance standards required of all recruited personnel would be required of African Americans. While this was not a call for recruitment, the Department of the Navy stated it would make a public announcement when actual recruiting began. The public announcement was made on May 20 that the naval services, including the Marine Corps, would open recruitment to African Americans on June 1.

The fight to keep African Americans out of the United States Marine Corps was over. In the words of General Holcomb, the Marine Corps leadership had gotten “licked” but had orders that they would faithfully follow. The wheels of change were now in full motion. Now it was time to recruit the men willing to be pioneers in a storied institution. It was time for those men to show the Marine Corps what they were made of.

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<sup>61</sup> Department of the Navy News Release, 7 April 1942. Navy and Old Army Branch, Military Archives Division, National Archives, Washington, D.C. in MacGregor and Nalty, 103.

## CHAPTER TWO

### GIRD UP THY LOINS, MY SON, AND TAKE UP THE FOREST GREEN

On May 25, 1942 the Commandant of the Marine Corps issued a memorandum to the district commanders of the Eastern, Central, and Southern recruiting divisions that stated:

...the Marine Corps Recruiting Service has been directed to begin on 1 June, 1942, the enlistment of colored male citizens of the United States between the ages of 17 and 29 years, inclusive, for service in a combat organization...All enlistments of colored personnel will be for general service, although quotas call for the enlistment of a number of occupational specialties. It is anticipated that small contingents of these specialists, such as cooks, bakers, barbers, and truck drivers, will be ordered to the training center beginning about 15 July, 1942.<sup>62</sup>

An earlier memorandum provides more insight regarding the responsibilities of recruiters and manpower and occupational specialty quotas per recruiting division. To the officers in charge of the recruiting divisions the Commandant stipulated that “only well-developed men of intelligence who meet our requirements will be accepted...no waivers will be submitted and no exceptions will be made...no man will be enlisted who has a history of venereal or tubercular disease...service record books will be stamped with the word “COLORED” on the front cover...”<sup>63</sup> Recruiters were instructed to enlist barbers, truck drivers, cooks and bakers at the earliest date possible to assist in the completion of the camp at Montford Point and to provide services to the first groups of African

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<sup>62</sup> Memorandum, The Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps to District Commanders, All Reserve Districts except 10<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup>, subject: Enlistment of colored personnel in the Marine Corps, 25 May 1942, Folder 0087, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

<sup>63</sup> Memorandum, The Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps to The Officer in Charge, Eastern Recruiting Division, Central Recruiting Division, Southern Recruiting Division, subject: Enlistment of colored personnel in the Marine Corps, 15 May 1942, Folder 0087, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

American recruits. Recruiters were also responsible for enlisting recruits for other particular occupational specialties.

An examination of a list of those specialties reveals some interesting vocations the Marine Corps thought to be essential for this first group of African American Marines. Of the African Americans that were to be recruited, Headquarters Marine Corps stipulated that 376 of them needed no previous qualifications. Essentially, these would be men who could be placed into any occupational field that required no previous technical knowledge and could be trained properly. Machine operators, machinists, and master mechanics accounted for the highest occupational specialty required with 85. The rest of the list calls for occupations that are common necessities within military units. The new unit at Montford Point would require the aforementioned truck drivers, cooks and bakers, as well as radio and switchboard operators, radio repairmen, clerks, general mechanics, and wire or linemen. Then there were a few unique occupational specialties that surely made the recruiters' job slightly more difficult. The United States Marine Corps stipulated that four cobblers, three blacksmiths, two motorcycle mechanics and eight motorcycle riders, six draftsmen, and two riggers be enlisted. Additionally, recruiters were instructed to actively seek out musicians to ensure there was a band that could be used in ceremonies, parades, and for the entertainment of fellow African American Marines. To accomplish this, recruiters needed to enlist two band leaders and an assortment of different instrumentalists, including two saxophonists, four trombonists, two drummers each for the snare and bass drum, and sixteen B-flat clarinet and cornet players.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

The diversity that is shown in the range of occupational specialties is also reflected in the diversity among the men who would pioneer this new chapter in United States Marine Corps history. These men came from different backgrounds, geographically and familial. They were raised in varying circumstances and encountered different experiences. Their journey into the United States Marine Corps also varied. When the enlistment of African Americans into the United States Marine Corps began in 1942, men were only drafted in the United States Army or Navy. However, once drafted, an individual could volunteer for a different branch. Therefore, technically, all African American men enlisted into the United States Marine Corps volunteered, with or without a slight nudge from Uncle Sam. How they got to the point of volunteering for the United States Marine Corps is unique to the individual. Motivations ranged from the desire to prove oneself, to prove to America the capabilities of the African American, to fulfill a sense of duty, or simply having nothing else to do in life and taking the opportunity to pave a new path. Once they were called upon to serve or made the decision to volunteer on their own cognizance, each prospective recruit would need to go through the enlistment process which required meeting often colorful United States Marine Corps recruiters who would give them their first taste of the Marine Corps way of life. Their lives and experiences would begin to converge on the trip down to North Carolina and upon reporting to the Montford Point camp.

When the recruitment and enlistment of African Americans began on June 1, 1942, the Marine Corps recruiting divisions set forth in their efforts to hit the quotas determined by Headquarters Marine Corps. Along with the required occupation

specialties previously mentioned, the recruiting divisions were given a set number of African Americans they were to enlist. Initially the Western Recruiting Division was excluded from recruiting African Americans and did not receive a mandatory quota. The Western Recruiting Division, consisting of Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona, were excluded due to the relatively small number of African Americans that were to be recruited nationally, the higher cost of transporting recruits from the western coast to North Carolina, and the lack of availability of transport trains due to the strain on the railroads' wartime responsibilities. This would change at the end of January 1943 when the Director of Recruiting sent a memorandum to the Western Recruiting Division that included a February quota of ten African American recruits. Of the ten, eight were to be enlisted out of California, and one each from Washington and Arizona. The remaining states were covered by three recruiting divisions: Eastern, Central, and Southern Division. In total, the three recruiting divisions were to enlist 900 African Americans for service into the United States Marine Corps. The original quota of 1,000 recruits had been inexplicably changed. The Eastern Recruiting Division, which included the New England states, Mid-Atlantic region, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, was responsible for enlisting 200 recruits. The Central Recruiting Division, which started in West Virginia and reached west to Colorado and Wyoming, were also responsible for enlisting 200 recruits. The bulk of the enlistments, 500 recruits, were to come from the Southern Recruiting Division, which

stretched from North Carolina in the east to New Mexico in the west and included Oklahoma and Arkansas.<sup>6566</sup>

African American recruits from forty of the forty-eight states were eligible to be enlisted into the United States Marine Corps. The large swath of geographical area meant recruits would come from an array of locations. Urban areas with large general populations and higher percentages of African Americans were an obvious recruiting ground for the Corps. Men such as Ken Rollick, Ernest Smith, Adolphus Griffith, and Joseph Kirnon would leave their homes located in the various areas of New York City. Four hours northeast, recruiters would find men such as Obie Hall in Boston, Massachusetts. Though he was originally born in Maywood, Illinois, Joseph Smith grew up primarily in Boston and would find his way into service from Beantown. In the nation's capital James Ferguson and Jubal Patterson waited eagerly for their opportunity to enlist. Chicago produced men such as Theodore Peters and Stanley Porter. Urban areas in the south were not neglected. Phillip Herout grew up in Miami, Florida while Wendell Ferguson and Edgar Cole spent their formative years in Dallas, Texas.

Mid-size cities were also well represented. In the Northeast, Charles Foreman was raised in Wilmington, Delaware and Gene Doughty spent his early life in Stamford, Connecticut. Louisville, Kentucky was the birthplace of Andrew Miles while George

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<sup>65</sup> Memorandum, The Director of Recruiting to The Officer in Charge, Eastern Recruiting Division, Central Recruiting Division, Western Recruiting Division, Southern Recruiting Division, subject: Quotas for month of February, 22 January 1943, Folder 0087, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

<sup>66</sup> Memorandum, The Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps to The Officer in Charge, Eastern Recruiting Division, Central Recruiting Division, Southern Recruiting Division, subject: Enlistment of colored personnel in the Marine Corps, 15 May 1942, Folder 0087, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Taylor was born two hours north in Indianapolis. While a majority of recruits from urban areas or midsize cities came from the Eastern or Central Recruiting Division areas of responsibilities, recruits born and raised in small towns or rural areas typically came from the South. Lee Ward and Frederick Drake were both native Alabamans, Ward being from Abbeville and Drake from Marengo County. South Carolinians Theodore Britton and Charles Pain were born and raised in North Augusta and Orangeburg. Roland Eubanks and Adner Batts were born one hundred miles apart in Chatham County and Edgecombe County, North Carolina. Fred Ash was born and raised in a tiny, southern Mississippi town called Delisle.

No matter where they grew up geographically, each African American recruit lived through a very trying time in American history. Becoming eligible for service in the United States armed forces in the Second World War meant they, like all others who served, were raised during a great economic depression. Joseph Kirnon, born November 10, 1921, would recall growing up during the depression in Harlem, “I was a little kid, you know, and went around the streets and everything like that, but it was a rough time there...it was pretty rough during that time.” Surviving for Kirnon meant doing anything he could to contribute towards his family’s well-being. Even though he was a high school graduate Kirnon “washed bathrooms, washed kitchen floors, washed dishes. You know, degrading for my education. And you just had to do it if you want to live.” This also meant engaging in more unsavory extracurricular activities: “Yeah, I was in a gang. Every street had a gang...you couldn’t let nobody take advantage of you...We was Flash.

We had a couple fights, gang fights.”<sup>67</sup> Adolphus Griffith also remembers the struggle growing up in New York City. Born in 1924, Griffith’s mother “never got married, so as a young woman with a young baby, she had a very struggling time” raising him. For Adolphus, growing up in New York City was “very tough, very tough...many times I went to sleep crying because I was hungry, just cried myself to sleep.”<sup>68</sup> Ernest Smith, born in 1922 and obviously one of the lucky ones, had a much different perspective on life during that time in New York City. For Ernest, growing up in the metropolis during the depression era “wasn’t a problem at all. My father worked. My mother took care of me.”<sup>69</sup>

For Joseph Smith, growing up in the depression didn’t seem so bad because it was all he knew. According to Smith, “my mother and father divorced or separated first when I was about five or six and we left Maywood (Illinois), Virginia for a short time and then on to Boston...” In Boston, Joseph, along with one sister, was raised by only his mother. To Joseph the depression was “very normal it seemed to me. I didn’t have much to be guided by. We were struggling with everybody else to make a living, I suppose, and of course when I was very young, I wasn’t even aware of that.”<sup>70</sup> Perhaps young age also helped Richard Warren view the times in a similar manner as Joseph Smith. Warren was

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\*Interviews utilized in this work are taken from two sources: Montford Point Marine Collection, Interviews, 2011, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA; and Henry I. Shaw Interviews, 1975, Oral History Collection, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA. Hereafter, Montford Point Marine Collection interviews will include “USMC” after the citation. Interviews conducted by Henry I. Shaw will include “Shaw” after the citation.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph Kirnon interview, USMC.

<sup>68</sup> Adolphus Griffith interview, USMC.

<sup>69</sup> Ernest Smith interview, USMC.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Smith interview, USMC.

a “country boy, out in the country.” The Warren family worked the farmland in Ivor, Virginia which “had a population of about 600...and we primarily cultivated corn, cotton, and having to walk seven miles to school one way, and then after school, work on the farm, take care of the cows, hogs, and a good life...it was a lot of fun and I enjoyed it.”<sup>71</sup>

Lee Ward had similar sentiments about small town life. Initially a farmer on a plantation owned by the Ward family in Alabama, Lee’s father moved to the small town of Abbeville to work at a hotel. “It was nice,” remembered Lee, “it was a little town. Everybody know everybody else, that type of thing. It was nice.”<sup>72</sup>

The makeup of the family could add or detract from the struggles faced during the depression. Stanley Porter was an infant when his family moved from his birthplace of Mount Bio, Mississippi to Arkansas. After a short time in Arkansas the Porter family moved to Indiana and finally settled in Chicago, Illinois. The family made the move north for economic opportunities, “scramble jobs, poor jobs, what do you say, domestic work.” Stanley’s father moved alone to Tennessee and “times went bad and of course, back in the middle or late 20’s, things got pretty rough for my family so they sent me back south. I lived in Arkansas again up until around the early or the middles 30’s...” Around the same time Stanly moved back to Chicago his mother remarried. His stepfather “worked at the stock yard and the stock yard provided a kind of a living for ourselves, along with her domestic work and what have you.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Warren interview, USMC.

<sup>72</sup> Lee Ward interview, USMC.

<sup>73</sup> Stanley Porter interview, USMC.

George McIvory “was brought up in a house with a grandmother and five aunts and one uncle” in Jacksonville, Florida. Like Stanley Porter, George’s mother was remarried. George’s stepfather “was a cook. He would work in Miami during the winter, and he would work up north in New Jersey at one of the resorts or somewhere in the summer.”<sup>74</sup> This set up would explain why George was primarily raised by his grandmother. Charles Pain was also raised by grandparents. Born in Orangeburg, South Carolina, Pain “was raised by a great grandmother and a great grandfather.” Interestingly, his great grandfather “was with the 55<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts regiment, Company C and he was a sergeant” during the Civil War. After his great grandfather’s passing in 1930, Pain moved in with his great great grandmother. It was not until Charles finished his high school education that he left Orangeburg “to go live with my mother and stepfather in Connecticut.”<sup>75</sup>

Other men were not even so lucky as to have a family to raise them. Paul Hagan’s mother and father died when he was a baby. After his parents passed away, Paul and his three siblings moved from Alabama to Georgia. Unfortunately, when they died “we had a home and everything, and we lost everything we had because we was so young, we didn’t know what tax was about. And I went from place to place...I didn’t have no kin people in Georgia. The ones that was in Alabama, I didn’t know nothing about them.”<sup>76</sup> Robert Mason Jr. also faced unfortunate circumstances. Mason was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in

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<sup>74</sup> George McIvory interview, USMC.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Pain interview, USMC

<sup>76</sup> Paul Hagan interview in Melton A. McLaurin, *The Marine of Montford Point: America’s First Black Marines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 18.

\*Hereafter the citation for interviews found in this work will include the name of the interviewee, interviewer/author last name, and page number.

1925 and spent the first ten years of his life there. Unfortunately, he was orphaned and “shipped off to Mississippi and stayed there for four years. Then I went to St. Louis and stayed until I went into the Marine Corps at the age of 18.”<sup>77</sup>

The depression of the late 1920s was not the only obstacle faced by these men as they grew into manhood. Jim Crow had a strangle hold on American society. Racism was rampant throughout the country and felt by most African American men who would one day become United States Marines. Growing up in Dallas, Texas, Edgar Cole remembered, “everything was rigidly segregated, schools, hospitals, you name it.”<sup>78</sup> The same went for Chicagoan Stanley Porter, “it’s segregated, the black community, what we call the ghettos of the community...The schools...the teachers were white...but anyway, it was segregated all the way up to high school.”<sup>79</sup> Joseph Kirnon could recall attempting to find employment in Harlem in the 1930’s, “Well, I can’t tell you some of the things I did to try to – you know I went to try to get a job and they got nasty. Had security men trying to put me out...They gonna tell me so-and-so and all that stuff I didn’t want to hear...And then when I did find a job cleaning bathrooms and kitchen floors...they’d spit on there – sometimes you’d be there cleaning and they’d spit on the floor just to be nasty. They’d be nasty and you’re ready to kill ‘em.”<sup>80</sup> Washington D.C. native Jubal Patterson also railed on employment for an African American during and following the depression years, “What opportunities? Slim to none. All menial jobs. Wasn’t no minimum wage during that time. If I can remember, most people that had a regular job worked six days a

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<sup>77</sup> Robert Mason Jr. interview, USMC.

<sup>78</sup> Edgar Cole interview, USMC.

<sup>79</sup> Stanley Porter interview, USMC.

<sup>80</sup> Joseph Kirnon interview, USMC.

week. They were making \$7 a week. No 40 hours. You worked as long as you were told to work.”<sup>81</sup>

While these situations were all too common in the era of Jim Crow, several African American recruits had a much different experience. Joseph Burrell was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1922. Burrell was fortunate enough to have avoided attending segregated schools. Burrell “went to all integrated schools” and afterwards while working for a trucking company all his “contacts with work and so forth at that time were whites.” Burrell recalled being “lucky enough to work for a trucking company that treated me was equal or better than equal.”<sup>82</sup> Others had minimal experience with the segregation laws. Growing up in Westchester, Pennsylvania, John Newton remembered, “it wasn’t an angry town. Segregation was there, but it’s an old Quaker town...our school system was segregated until the 8<sup>th</sup> grade...then, we went up to the high school, which was integrated...it wasn’t a good system, because I found out later as I got older and looked back, that what was really happening is that the system got rid of undesirable, quote undesirable Blacks...”<sup>83</sup> Similar thoughts on segregation and racism were imparted by a few Southerners. Alabaman Lee Ward recalled, “In my little town of Abbeville, it wasn’t that much prejudice going on. I guess it was underlying, but we just didn’t know it. I guess when you grow up in a place and you know everybody, everybody knows you. It was that type of thing.” Ward was even given opportunities for employment, “I met a white gentleman who was a preacher. He gave me a job delivering groceries to a house.

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<sup>81</sup> Jubal Patterson interview, USMC.

<sup>82</sup> Joseph Burrell interview, USMC.

<sup>83</sup> John Newton interview, USMC.

They call for certain things and we would deliver them to that address. It was wonderful because he was a pastor and he kind of looked after younger men. He gave me a break and I appreciated that.”<sup>84</sup> Two others had experiences like those of Lee Ward. Theodore Britton was born in North Augusta, South Carolina in 1925. Britton had a positive childhood growing up in the south due to his father. Britton “was blessed. People always seemed to like me. They liked my father. My father used to get very special treatment in Aiken County. I only learned many, many years later that the reason he was given such good treatment is his grandfather was white, one of the great landowners down there and the grandfather took a liking to him and always seemed to give him many things that other folks did not get but I was especially blessed...I have happy memories of being down there.”<sup>85</sup> Norman Preston lived the first twelve years of his life in Selma, Alabama before moving to Ohio. This gave Preston the unique experience and perspective on segregation and racism in the United States. Preston posited when referring to racism, “But you know what brings that on you? Yourself.” Norman clarified, “Well, basically really being from the South and you know, everybody had, I guess, something happen to you, now being from the South...segregation was segregation. Would you believe in my lifetime, I have never been called a Nigger, never. That’s hard when you come up through the South...” Preston seemed to have little trouble in the North as well. After finding employment working for a railroad in Ohio just after the Second World War began, “a gentleman walked up to me one day and he said you know what? He said you

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<sup>84</sup> Lee Ward interview, USMC.

<sup>85</sup> Theodore Britton interview, USMC.

have a job here now, he said, but this is not your style of job...He says, in a short time there's going to be a change here that the railroad is going to hire minority blacks to get into their four year apprenticeship. And he said, I don't know when it's going to happen, he said, but I'm going to watch you and I'm going to watch the board and sure enough, he walked up to me one day and he said now Monday, there's going to be a list of names on that board. They're going to pick five...and I was one of the five.”<sup>86</sup>

Highlighting these experiences that could be defined as positive or neutral in this particular era in American history is not designed to diminish the negative experiences caused by racism and segregation laws. The tragedy of racism and segregation in the United States is well-documented and could not be thoroughly examined in a work of this scope if it were appropriate to include it. They are meant to affirm that though these men were similar in the complexion of their skin, African Americans that were recruited into the United States Marine Corps were different in most other categories of their life. These differences extended into the men's reasoning or motivation for joining the United States Marine Corps.

A memorandum from Headquarters Marine Corps to the Secretary of the Navy dated June 23, 1942 stated:

Upon initiating the enlistment of Negroes 1 June, 1942, for the composition of a battalion for general service in the Marine Corps, a fair interest was shown throughout the Eastern, Southern, and Central Recruiting Divisions and there were a considerable number of applicants who applied for enlistment. The general type that applied was not at all representative and physical and mental examinations quickly deleted most of the original applicants. Negro colleges, high schools and institutions have assured our recruiting officers that there would be no difficulty in securing or in filling our requirements, but to date, that prediction has not been

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<sup>86</sup> Norman Preston interview, USMC.

borne out, and to include the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, a total of sixty-three (63) had been enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve.<sup>87</sup>

There are a few possibilities as to why the Marine Corps initially struggled to enlist African Americans. The first could simply be a continued practice of deliberate disqualification by physicians. The practice of disqualifying African American volunteers or draftees for physical or mental reasons surely did not stop immediately and remained in place to some extent until manpower needs became dire later in the war. Another could be recruiter racial prejudices. Though they followed the orders of the Marine Corps and their command leadership, recruiters were offered a certain amount of autonomy in order to reach their quotas. In 1942, recruiting a few African Americans for service in the Marine Corps was unlikely a priority in the eyes of enlisted, non-commissioned officers who also had higher quotas for white Marines. Additionally, recruiters were initially required to enlist African Americans with special skills to fill occupational specialties that were mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Perhaps recruiters made those specialties their priority and ran into difficulty when they were unable to locate or enlist an African American with previous experience blacksmithing or cobbling.

Whatever the reasoning for the slow start, the African American colleges, high schools, and institutions mentioned in the memorandum were correct. High school graduates, men with college experience or degrees, and others who had work experience in the public and private sectors could be found in abundance within the African American community. Additionally, many were willing and eager to serve their country,

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<sup>87</sup> Memorandum, Headquarters Marine Corps to The Secretary of the Navy, subject: Enlistment of Negroes, 23 June 1942, Folder 0087, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

in any branch of service, in the hopes of gaining more respect within their community and in the hopes of garnering respect for the African American community as a whole.

Jubal Patterson and James Ferguson grew up in Washington D.C. and had the pleasure of watching the Marines around the Marine Barracks at 8<sup>th</sup> and I. Patterson remembered, “As a kid, I used to go up to the Marine Barracks and watch those sentries on the gate come out and do their thing and I thought that was such a wonderful thing...I said when I go in the service, that’s where I want to go, I want to go in the Marine Corps.”<sup>88</sup> Ferguson “picked the Marines because I visualized myself in those dress blue uniforms and jumping out of the Hollywood type beaches. He remembered growing up that “D.C. is Marine town, because back in those days they had what is known as Navy Day...And one of the features of the Navy Day exhibition was a mock landing by Marine on the 11<sup>th</sup> Street side of the Navy Yard. They made a mock landing coming out of the barges with guns blazing, lights. And that inspired me to be a Marine.”<sup>89</sup>

While they had never seen a United States Marine in person, others were impressed by those they saw on the movie and television screen. Phillip Herout “always wanted to be a Marine...I seen some movies. I followed John Wayne, John Payne and all those guys in the Marine Corps and it’s just been something that I’ve always wanted to do.”<sup>90</sup> Joseph Myers’s desire to join the Marine Corps sprouted after his “brother William went to see this movie *The Fighting Devil Dogs* with John Wayne\*. And that’s when we

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<sup>88</sup> Jubal Patterson interview, USMC.

<sup>89</sup> James Ferguson interview, USMC.

<sup>90</sup> Philip Herout interview, USMC.

\**The Fighting Devil Dogs* stars Lee Powell and Herman Brix as Marine Second Lieutenants who battle to stop a diabolical terrorist known as “The Lightning.” The movie was released in 1938 but it did not star John Wayne as Myers asserts.

decided that we want to go in the Marines, we wanted to be Marines.” Perhaps the heroics of the Marines featured in the movie motivated Myers to do more than just enlist in the United States Marine Corps. When Myers arrived at the recruiting station, the Marine recruiter initially tried to dissuade him from enlisting by telling him, “You know what, you don’t want to go there. That’s the first to fight, first to fight and first to die.” To which Myers replied, “I don’t mind dying...people dying in the streets. I would rather die, I said, but I am going to take a whole lot of them with me.”<sup>91</sup>

As a child Archibald Mosley was unmoved by the idea of military glory but was obsessed with being a different kind of American hero, a cowboy. Mosley “was a fanatic about cowboys.” He would fondly remember, “that was back in those days when Tom Mix and Buck Jones and Hopalong Cassidy was one of my favorite cowboys. And they had what’s known as serials, every Saturday” However, to make it to those serials and watch the adventures of his favorite cowboys, Mosley “had to sit through a war picture, where you saw Marines...and I saw these uniforms and I fell in love with those uniforms. And I told my two buddies, I said, look, man, don’t you think that a black man would look good in those Marine Corps uniforms? Just look how it looks. It’s got some red in it, it’s got some blue. It, it’s just beautiful.”<sup>92</sup>

Mosley was representative of another reason to join the United States Marine Corps: the uniform. Mosley was describing the Dress Blue Alpha uniform, also known simply as “Dress Blues.” This uniform is unmistakable and known around the world. It is

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<sup>91</sup> Joseph Myers interview, McLaurin, 31-32.

<sup>92</sup> Archibald Mosley interview, McLaurin, 31.

also steeped in history. The black jacket with red trim has a raised collar to represent the leather collars worn by Marines aboard ship during the American Revolution to protect their necks from saber slashes. There are thirteen gold or brass buttons representing the original thirteen colonies which are emblazoned with the Marine Corps's original eagle and anchor insignia designed in 1804. Blue trousers are worn by all ranks, however non-commissioned officers, staff non-commissioned officers and commissioned officers have a red stripe sewn on to honor the fallen Marines at the Battle of Chapultepec. The uniform is finished with black shoes, a white belt with gold buckle around the waist, and white barracks cover. It is undoubtedly the most attractive uniform worn in the United States military and was a determining factor in many men's decision in choosing the Marine Corps.

In Washington D.C. James Ferguson remembered "back in those days, all Marines wore dress blues...And that, quite naturally, that inspired me because I like it, like the uniform..." Alpha Gainous had always wanted to be serve in the United States military but when he was 15 years old he, "saw, when I wasn't even allowed to join the Marine Corps, I saw a young white lad with a Marine Corps blue on and I said and I declared, that was the uniform I will wear one day...I was drafted into the Army and I begged them to let me go in the Marine Corps."<sup>93</sup> Robert Mason Jr. had a similar feeling when he first saw his cousin in a Marine Corps uniform, "I asked him which hotel do you work at downtown? Dressed in a uniform, red, gold, blue. He said no, junior, I am a

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<sup>93</sup> Alpha Gainous interview, USMC.

United States Marine, a member of the greatest fighting organization in the world...I was very impressed...So I selected the Marine Corps.”<sup>94</sup>

For Stanley Porter, the uniform lured him out of another branch he was already serving in. After graduating high school, Porter “enlisted in the Coast Guard and at that particular time it seemed to have been more of a liberal branch of service because they were bringing us in not as cooks and service, because you resented all of that, you wanted to escape it in any way that you could, but you knew that if you were drafted you would be put into a situation where maybe you didn’t want to be.” Porter was satisfied with his decision until he “saw that blue uniform and I saw that uniform and, believe it or not, my dreams was wearing that blue uniform. And all I could think of is coming home and getting the praises from my community with that blue uniform on.”<sup>95</sup> For Reuben McNair, a dislike for another service’s uniform played into his decision, “one place I didn’t like the (Navy) uniforms.” However, the uniform was not the ultimate deciding factor. McNair “just loved the idea of being a Marine and I thought it was very attractive. I loved seeing some of the things that they was doing and I thought it was a great thing to try being a Marine.”<sup>96</sup> McNair was cognizant of the Marine Corps’s tradition of preparedness during peacetime and tactical proficiency on the field of battle, something that was attractive to other recruits as well.

After learning about the United States Marine Corps accepting African Americans in a New York City newspaper, Ernest Smith told himself, ““I know I have to go into the

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<sup>94</sup> Robert Mason interview, USMC.

<sup>95</sup> Stanley Porter interview, USMC.

<sup>96</sup> Reuben McNair interview, USMC.

service. I'm going to go into the best and get the best training I can to protect myself and fight for my country."<sup>97</sup> David Dinkins had the same thoughts as Ernest Smith, "I figured a way to stay alive is to be well trained. And the way to be well trained is to be a Marine."<sup>98</sup> Although the air of confidence exuded by the Marine Corps was appealing to recruits, some family members viewed it in a different light. After Herman Darden enlisted in the Marine Corps he stopped at the local dime store and proudly bought a Marine Corps emblem he planned to use to inform his mother of his upcoming departure. When Darden "got home, oh, my goodness! My mother cries and says, 'Why do you want to go in that crazy outfit?' I says, well, you know, tradition: first in battle, first at home. I'll be home before the rest of them."<sup>99</sup>

The toughness and fighting spirit was also appealing to those men who thought highly of themselves in the aspect of physical conflict. Charles Davenport had a dispute on a job site and had decided he was through working with a particular boss. Davenport was admittedly "a little hot tempered, and I told the boss I didn't have to work for him. The United States government had a job for me, and I walked off the job that day, and into Pittsburgh, and enlisted in the Marine Corps." Davenport and a friend decided to enlist together. Unfortunately, their enlistment in May 1942 never materialized and Davenport and his friend were told to come back in August. By the time August rolled around, Davenport's friend had married and decided he was no longer interested in the Marine Corps. Davenport didn't want to enlist by himself "and I waited and worked, too,

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<sup>97</sup> Ernest Smith interview, USMC.

<sup>98</sup> David Dinkins interview, McLaurin, 27.

<sup>99</sup> Herman Darden interview, Shaw.

and continued to speak with my boss where I worked. This is when I was pushed too far, on my desire to go into the Marines. And I guess you could say that I had (the reputation of) kind of a toughie, and I liked to fight. I was very good at wrestling, and I was moderate as far as fistfighting was concerned, and being small of stature, and things like that, I got pushed around quite a bit, and it was in me to show that even though I was small in stature, I was big enough and strong enough, and willing to be in the best fighting force they had, and I joined the Marine Corps.”<sup>100</sup>

It wasn't just civilians who recognized the value of being in an organization that had a national and global reputation like the United States Marine Corps. Among the first African American men who volunteered for service in the Marine Corps were several with prior military service. John Pridgen was a member of the Army's all-black 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry in the 1930s and George Jackson gave up an Army commission as a lieutenant to switch services.<sup>101</sup> Gilbert “Hashmark” Johnson served in the U.S. Army's 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division from 1923 to 1928. After spending five years in the civilian sector, Johnson enlisted in the United States Navy as a steward in 1933. In 1942, upon hearing the news of the Marine Corps accepting African American recruits, Johnson requested and was approved for transfer to the Marine Corps. In reference to his transfer after sixteen years of military service in two separate branches, Johnson commented, “it had always been my desire to be a Marine.”<sup>102</sup> Even though Winston De Vergee was only fifteen when he first attempted to enlist in the United States Marine Corps, he already had two years of

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<sup>100</sup> Charles Davenport interview, McLaurin, 26.

<sup>101</sup> Donnelly and Shaw, 6.

<sup>102</sup> Gilbert Johnson interview, Shaw.

military service under his belt. Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, De Vergee successfully lied about his age and enlisted in the 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the New York National Guard. Eager to join his older brother who had enlisted in the Marine Corps, De Vergee was promptly laughed off by Marine Corps recruiters when trying to convince them he was old enough for enlistment. Knowing the local draft boards would not be as scrupulous, De Vergee entered his name into the draft and was promptly drafted into service. Once drafted, he requested to join the Marine Corps and was enlisted by the same recruiters who had recently turned him away.

Others were wholly unaware that the Marine Corps was an option or that it even existed. When George Taylor was drafted he initially volunteered for the Army. He asked them, “I wanna get in the calvary. And they say, you couldn’t get in the cavalry because the cavalry’s being cut out.” After the revelation about the cavalry, Taylor accepted a general enlistment into the Army. However, as he went further down the line he was picked out by a Navy recruiter and told he would be enlisted into the United States Navy. Taylor reacted harshly, “I said, no. Send me to jail. Call the police, cause I’m not going in the Navy.” Amidst the ruckus a Marine lieutenant entered the room with a cigarette in his hand and picks up Taylor’s papers. The lieutenant looked at the papers, “and he said, ‘what about the Marines?’ I said, ‘Marines? What’s that?’ He showed me a picture up on the wall. He said, you got a choice between the Navy and the Marines. So I taken the Marines.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> George Taylor interview, McLaurin, 33.

Very similar to Taylor was Ellis Cunningham. Cunningham would admit that he “knew nothing about the Marine Corps. As far as I was concerned, there was the Army.”<sup>104</sup> Like Taylor, Cunningham wanted to don the campaign hat and riding boots of a cavalryman. However, Cunningham found himself in a bit of a bind when he failed to register for the draft on his birthday and instead did so several months later. Feeling as though he shouldn’t cause any issues, Cunningham gave the draft board a fake date of birth and accepted his enlistment into the United States Marine Corps.

Like Cunningham and Taylor, many recruits would settle for the Marine Corps after being rejected for another branch of service. After completing his physical and being informed of his draft status, John Brown “went over to the Army and told them I wanted to sign up for the Army Air Corps. They told me they couldn’t promise me that.” Not wanting to be part of the regular Army, Brown “went to the Marine Corps and he said he (the recruiter) was sorry he couldn’t sign up but two men that day and he already had two.” While in discussion with the Navy recruiter and being put off by the idea of being a steward, Brown “felt a tug on my arm and I turned around and there’s this big Sergeant from the Marine Corps and I was upset now (and said) what the hell you want. And he says I want you and I said when I was over there you told me you couldn’t take me. He says well one of my men decided to go today and I can take you, sign you up, and you’ll go in two weeks.”<sup>105</sup> Alex Johnson was also rejected by the Army Air Corps.

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<sup>104</sup> Ellis Cunningham interview, McLaurin, 24.

Ironically, the day Cunningham showed up to the draft board and date of birth he gave was November 10, the birthday of the United States Marine Corps, a fact he was unaware of.

<sup>105</sup> John Brown interview, USMC.

Johnson simply turned and saw that “next door was the Marine Recruiting Office. My friend and I went to join and I was accepted and he wasn’t.”<sup>106</sup>

After a lifelong love of sailing, Stanley Costley “wanted to go in the Navy. I always liked to sail...” Costley was informed that when going through the draft process that a draftee would be given the opposite branch they requested. So when asked which service he wanted Costley responded with the Army and “they said Navy. I said good.” However, while he was waiting in the recruiting office with a group of other Navy recruits, a Marine recruiter walked in and asked for volunteers for the Marine Corps. When “nobody moved. (He) said, okay, you four, five men come with me.”<sup>107</sup> Though Costley’s luck ran out, Ken Rollick’s stayed alive when he was called to service. Rollick “actually didn’t want to go on the ships. I didn’t want to go in the Navy because through scuttlebutt or however you want to put it, I heard about what happened to black people in the Navy...it was either waiter or something that I didn’t want to be. Why am I fighting the war serving other people...”<sup>108</sup>

There remains a group of African American recruits whose reasoning for joining the Marine Corps went beyond uniforms, tradition, or a desire to not serve in another branch. Some did not want to be singled out as someone not willing to serve in a time of need. Norman Sneed “was working in a shipyard so I had this deferment. So all my friends were beginning to leave to go in service, you know, and I wanted to be in service. You had to be in service or you were a bum walking the streets, at that particular

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<sup>106</sup> Alex Johnson interview, Shaw.

<sup>107</sup> Stanley Costley interview, USMC.

<sup>108</sup> Kenneth Rollick interview, USMC.

time...”<sup>109</sup> Others just felt a need to serve. Al Banker “joined the Marine Corps because I felt it was the proper thing to do. To be patriotic to my country. I felt that this is history in the making. And I felt that I wanted to be part of it.”<sup>110</sup> Growing up in Salisbury, North Carolina, Paul Holtsclaw was “always taught to do the right thing and to obey God and keep his Commandments, and I just thought it would be nice that I go into the service because I’ve always had a feeling of loyalty to my country and duty to God, duty to country and duty to self.”<sup>111</sup> Theodore Britton believed his desire to serve in the United States Marine Corps was due to a deep connection with his family’s past: “I have sort of a pioneer spirit. I think back to it. My father relocated from South Carolina to New York. He didn’t know New York at all. He had never been there. He wasn’t that well educated and yet he uprooted his family...and went off to New York to make a living for himself. Thinking back to it, I always think that my father was a pioneer in a sense and maybe I carried along that spirit later on.”<sup>112</sup>

Finally, there are men like Robert Little. Little will “tell you like this: When I was a young kid, I always wanted to be a Marine.” Little would not have seen many Marines in his hometown of Cleveland and does not reminisce about seeing Marines in the movies. When the urge to become a Marine blossomed at the tender age of twelve or thirteen, Little was unaware the Marine Corps prohibited African Americans from enlisting. That ignorance persisted until he was drafted. Luckily for Little, as he was

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<sup>109</sup> Norman Sneed interview, Shaw.

<sup>110</sup> Al Banker interview, McLaurin, 23.

<sup>111</sup> Paul Holtsclaw interview, McLaurin, 29.

<sup>112</sup> Theodore Britton interview, USMC.

standing in line waiting to enter the recruiting station, a recruiter walked up to him unsolicited and said, “I’m putting you in the Marine Corps.”<sup>113</sup>

The African American men who enlisted in the Marine Corps during the Second World War could not have been more different. They came from different geographic areas. They were raised in the bustling urban sprawls of the Northeast, the industrial hubs of the Midwest, and the quiet rural farmlands of the South. They had different family makeups. They were children of happy families and children of broken homes. They were children of divorced parents or raised by single parents or grandparents. They were one of a hoard of siblings and single children orphaned and alone. They experienced the racism and the depression differently. For many the struggles were real and constant while others were free of want and worry. No matter the road that was taken, the outbreak of the Second World War resulted in these men joining a new family. This family would face the same struggles and defeats while sharing the victories and successes. All this would be done by confronting a series of obstacles, the first of which was the trip to Montford Point.

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<sup>113</sup> Robert Little interview, USMC.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ACT SLOWLY AND WITH EXCEEDING CARE...

Upon their successful enlistment into the United States Marine Corps, the African American recruits, just like any other military recruit, were given paper orders to report to the camp where they would be given their basic training. For the white recruits this meant orders to recruit depots at either Parris Island, South Carolina or San Diego, California. African American recruits were ordered to the newly established segregated training camp at Montford Point aboard Camp LeJeune, just outside of the small town of Jacksonville, North Carolina. Before beginning their travel, recruits were typically given ten to fourteen days of furlough to get their affairs in order and say their goodbyes to friends and family. On rare occasions, usually depending on manpower needs or the desire of the recruits to leave immediately, furlough would be withheld and the recruit would leave for training on the day of enlistment or within a few days.

Once the recruits returned from their furlough, they would be issued tickets to transport them to Camp LeJeune, North Carolina. If their residence was close enough to the sprawling military base, the recruit would be placed on a bus and driven directly to the training camp. Most recruits lived a considerable distance away from the eastern coastal location of Camp LeJeune and required the only available form of transportation that could cover great distances in a relatively short amount of time. Therefore, upon receiving orders, most recruits would also be given train tickets. For those recruits enlisting from their hometowns in the South, the train typically took them straight to Jacksonville with stops in places like Atlanta and Savannah. The recruits coming from

the North, even the more Midwestern states such as Michigan or Illinois, were routed to Washington D.C. where they would transfer trains before descending below the Mason-Dixon Line.

Many recruits from the South or with ties to the South were familiar with the situations they were about to face. Herman Darden's parents were from the Carolinas and had traveled back to the region several times as a child and teenager to see extended family. Darden "knew how the situation (was), I knew what to expect, and whatnot, and we knew what the situation was and so, we'd govern ourselves accordingly."<sup>114</sup> While Reuben McNair did not have much experience traveling, he did grow up in the South so segregation "was a thing that I was somewhat accustomed to. So, it wasn't something that come to me as a great surprise...I'm sure that this could've been a shocking thing for some of the fellows coming from the North to the South."<sup>115</sup>

The trip for those leaving their homes in the North began well for the most part. Stanley Porter boarded the train at night in Chicago and "had sleeping car privileges from Chicago to Washington D.C."<sup>116</sup> After passing his physical and examinations and being issued his orders to report to Montford Point, Obie Hall was given "a ticket, a first-class ticket, a pullman ticket, which I knew nothing about being from Boston."<sup>117</sup> Winston De Vergee had quite the pleasant trip from New York City to Washington D.C. The trip had begun on a gleeful note as De Vergee and several other white recruits wondered out loud what boot camp was going to be like and regaled each other about their life experiences

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<sup>114</sup> Herman Darden, McLaurin, 37.

<sup>115</sup> Reuben McNair, McLaurin, 37.

<sup>116</sup> Stanley Porter interview, USMC.

<sup>117</sup> Obie Hall interview, Shaw.

and what made them enlist in the Marine Corps. When it came time for dinner the group of recruits left their seats in coach for the diner car. De Vergee quickly noticed that only one seat was available in the diner car and it at table where a Navy Captain was eating. The Navy Captain saw De Vergee and offered him the seat to which De Vergee replied, "With your permission, sir." Impressed with De Vergee's military courtesy, the intrigued Captain asked him if he had been in service and continued to question him about his military training. The two men conversed until De Vergee finished his meal and returned to coach where his fellow recruits were in awe at De Vergee's gall to sit next to such a high-ranking individual. Once the train arrived in Washington D.C., De Vergee was once again invited by a stranger to sit and converse. However, this time it was a lovely, young girl sitting in a restaurant at the station who offered De Vergee company. De Vergee sat down next to the girl, bought her a soft drink, and began to talk. After some time, the girl dropped a bomb shell on De Vergee. She asked him if he wanted to get married because she was pregnant. Feeling humiliated and naïve for allowing himself to get into such a situation, De Vergee was saved by the loudspeaker calling for all recruits to board. He politely excused himself and quickly walked away while the girl yelled her address in case he wanted to write to her.<sup>118</sup>

The accommodations for the recruits were adequate and the ride went smoothly until they needed to transfer trains in Washington D.C. With a first-class ticket still in hand Obie Hall arrived at his train in Washington D.C. "and I get in my berth there and man comes and says, 'What are you doing in here?' Which I didn't understand what he

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<sup>118</sup> Winston De Vergee, *Assignment in Hell* (New York: Vantage Press, 1991), 32-33.

was talking about.” After explaining to the train employee that he had a ticket issued by the United States Government, Hall remained dumbfounded by the looks he was receiving from other travelers and workers. Hall thought, “something’s wrong somewhere. So I get a colored porter and he says, ‘You’ve passed through Washington, the black line.’ I say, ‘is that right!...I said, ‘I’m not moving, OK?’ Not being militant, I just didn’t...I couldn’t understand.”<sup>119</sup> After the train moved away from the station, Hall was given a private compartment to ease the tension. In Porter’s group “there were three of us...One of us, he looked white.” When boarding the train the recruit who looked white got on the train but “of course the conductor says you two go in there...and we go on the car, the segregated train going South.”<sup>120</sup>

While Porter, Hall, and De Vergee had no issues until arriving in Washington D.C., Joseph Burrell’s troubles began immediately. Boarding his train in Cincinnati, “conductor said, boy you’re in the wrong section...And I showed him my papers and he raised his finger and two SP’s (Shore Patrol) came and threw me off the train.” By the time Burrell again attempted to board his train he was already five days late according to his orders. Burrell’s orders “were to be in camp on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December and I knew they didn’t want me for Christmas, so I didn’t leave home until two days after Christmas.” After being thrown off the train, Burrell spent two days in Cincinnati before successfully boarding another train. By the time he reported to Montford Point, he would be eleven days late.

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<sup>119</sup> Obie Hall interview, Shaw.

<sup>120</sup> Stanley Porter interview, USMC.

Once the trains transporting recruits continued its trip to North Carolina, those with no experience with Southern society or traveling were in for a rude awakening. James Ferguson explained, “The minute you cross the Potomac River...the train then was segregated...the coach for the colored folks was half coach and half baggage, with the coach part being behind the coal car and the baggage part separated from the rest of the train.”<sup>121</sup> Winston De Vergee was surprised when a porter stopped him from boarding the at the back of the train and told him to take a seat at the front. De Vergee “looked at him in disbelief, knowing that all blacks were to ride at the back of the train. Anyhow I took his advice and went up front and sat down. I looked around and noticed that I was the only one seated.” As the train began to pull away De Vergee realized the predicament he was in, “it was an old-fashioned train, a coal burner belching out thick black smoke. The coach I was riding in was filled with black smoke in no time. I was coughing and spitting black dust that entered my mouth and nose. This was my first taste of southern hospitality.”<sup>122</sup> Especially in the heat of the summer, African American passengers in the segregated train car had little choice but to suffer since “back in those days, there were no air conditioning, but you could open the windows and when you opened the windows you got all the coal dust.”<sup>123</sup>

To make matters worse, there was only one segregated train car. While Winston De Vergee was lucky enough to have the train car to himself, much of the time the car was overcrowded. When Edgar Cole got to Washington D.C. “that’s when the hell

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<sup>121</sup> James Ferguson interview, USMC.

<sup>122</sup> De Vergee, 33.

<sup>123</sup> James Ferguson interview, USMC.

started. At that time the trains were packed, troops, civilians...there was only one coach provided for African Americans, it was right behind the coal car. When it was filled up, that was it.” Cole arrived late to his train and began to panic when it began to move forward. He told himself, “I have to get on this train ...so I looked around and I panicked and I looked and I saw an SP and I ran to the SP and I kept trying to say here are my orders, I have to report, I have to get on this train...he snatched it out of my hand and looked at it and he said, well I’ll be damn, they’re letting you people in the Marines...” The Shore Patrolman was able to inform the conductor to stop the train which allowed Cole to walk to the front where the segregated car was located. So he stopped the train, by this time the train had begun to move, so he stopped the train. As he got closer, he “heard a lot of babies crying, women crying, I said well, this must be, I must be getting close. So I eventually walked into this coach, standing room only from Washington D.C. to North Carolina. But you know, I was young, fit football player and all that so I could do it.”<sup>124</sup>

During his trip to North Carolina, Joseph Smith was grouped with several white recruits that refused to allow Smith to travel separately. The group of white recruits forced their way onto the segregated train car, an act which Smith “didn’t know and didn’t fully appreciate the courage and character that it took to – it just seemed natural that he should say that and he did, and I expected that’s the way things would be for on and on, you know?” Smith wouldn’t fully experience the difficulty of riding in a segregated train car until the train stopped in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. It was then

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<sup>124</sup> Edgar Cole interview, USMC.

that Smith realized he would be permanently separated from the white recruits that had stood up for him and whom he had become comfortable with. While Smith's orders stated that deboard in Rocky Mount and board a train for Jacksonville, North Carolina, the white recruits were to continue on the same train to Parris Island, South Carolina. Smith "never felt so lonely in all of my life. I got off there and there wasn't a person in sight near Rocky Mount. I saw nobody. I got off, waved goodbye to them and they went on." After waiting for quite some time, a long train with empty or mostly empty cars arrived at the station. As the train came to a halt Smith made his way to one of the empty cars but was stopped by a conductor who asked "where are you going?" And I said I'm going to I think it was Jacksonville. I'm going to Jacksonville. 'No, I don't mean that. I mean where do you think you're going to sit.' All the empty cars, he said 'you see those people down there?' And I looked and there was just a hoard of black people." Smith had thought the station "was abandoned and then were just pouring out, a hoard of them. Women with bundles and babies and they're all headed in that direction when there were empty cars." His attitude being packed into a single car was much different than that of Edgar Cole, "I mean segregation is one thing, but that was inhumane. I mean especially with empty cars. They could have segregated just with another car. And they're all crowded in there and it was in the summer, in June, I think June or July, and I opened the windows and got some air and got more cinders from the track than air. Was suffering."<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Joseph Smith interview, USMC.

Even though the men recruited from the North received a taste of segregation as they were forced onto segregated train cars in Washington D.C., their layover in Rocky Mount or Wilmington, North Carolina or reaching their final destination in Jacksonville, North Carolina would be their introduction to the harshness of Jim Crow. For most African American recruits, finding something to eat when arriving to Rocky Mount would be top priority. The last time they had eaten was most likely in the dinner car of that train they were aboard prior to arriving in Washington D.C. After leaving Washington D.C., the recruits in the segregated car would have no access to food to purchase on the train. With meal tickets in hand, African American recruits were disappointed when told they could not eat inside the diner located at the Rocky Mount train station. When James Ferguson arrived with three other African American recruits, they “went int to get something to eat and they told us we couldn’t eat in there, we had to go outside. It was raining outside. But they had a little window on the side where we had to put in our order and eat it outside in the rain.”<sup>126</sup> When Winston De Vergee arrived at the train station diner in Wilmington he “noticed a sign over one of the doors. COLORED ONLY. I stopped to stare at the sign. The white marines told me not to go in. All of us will stay outside together.”<sup>127</sup> Joseph Carpenter, realizing how far from home he was and how little control he had over the situation, remained non-combative when told to order his food at the side window. However, even remaining outside was no guarantee of satisfying one’s hunger. Carpenter was in charge of his group and the meal tickets, “so,

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<sup>126</sup> James Ferguson interview, USMC.

<sup>127</sup> De Vergee, 34.

we stood at the window waiting for the waitress to come over and, you know, assist us. But she was talking to someone, some white fellow at the counter and looked over at us and ignored us and continued to talk...So naturally, I tapped on the window...she looked and turned away again. So this time I knocked a little harder. So then she came over and said, 'what do you niggers want?'...after she put it that way, I decided, well, best that we don't bother to eat here."<sup>128</sup> Carpenter and his group would have to wait until arriving in Jacksonville to find something to eat.

The train station diner was not the only area off limits to the African American recruits. When Steven Robinson arrived to Rocky Mount he was not allowed to detrain with the rest of the passengers riding in coach, "I had to walk, detrain out in the yard someplace, about a mile away from the station and walk, I think it was about 2:00 in the morning, walk along the tracks to the station." After arriving to the station, Robinson was relieved to find the lights still on and a mostly empty waiting area. Robinson found a seat, set down his duffel bag, and pulled out a magazine to occupy himself until his next train arrived several hours later. As he read his magazine, "an African American man swept over; he was sweeping, and he swept over where I was and looked at me and said, you have to move to the other side. And I looked behind him and there was a police officer, who was looking at me in kind of a menacing sort of way." Figuring the janitor had to sweep and mop the area he was occupying but none the less confused about the situation, Robinson moved to the other side of the waiting area. After several minutes the janitor came back over to Robinson and clarified his instructions, "you have to go to the other

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<sup>128</sup> Joseph Carpenter interview, McLaurin, 39-40.

side of the station out that door and around the side.” After walking out of the station, “something (said), look, look back and I looked back, I looked over at the station, at the entrance to the station, and I saw a sign. It had to be about three feet in width and maybe five feet in length and it says For Whites Only.” Coming to the realization that he was in whole different world, Robinson turned the corner and found a “little room about, maybe, twelve by fourteen (feet) that African Americans were in. They were stacked in on top of one another. Had a little fourteen, maybe twenty-wat bulb that you could barely see yourself around in the station there. Smell of urine. There were suitcases everywhere. Your eyes had to become accustomed to the dark.”<sup>129</sup>

Recruits could also run into issues dealing with the employees of the train station. When Charles Davenport arrived in Rocky Mount he realized there was an issue with his ticket that needed to be straightened out so he could report on time. The train arrived at the station at about 2:00 in the morning and, “there was only one stationmaster there. I went to the window, and I called him buddy...and, he asked me, who are you talking to, calling me buddy? And I told him you...we got into quite a discussion and an argument, and the next thing we know, the police were there.” The stationmaster wanted the police to arrest Davenport for being rude and refused to amend his ticket. After informing the local police that he was on his way to Marine Corps boot camp, the responding officers called over an Army Military Policemen (MPs). The MP looked over Davenport’s orders and ordered the stationmaster to fix the ticket. Later, as the African American recruits were boarding the segregated train car, the conductor decided to become combative and

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<sup>129</sup> Steven Robinson interview, McLaurin, 44-45.

argumentative with the recruits and called the MPs once again. The MPs “put the conductor in his place” and there were no problems the rest of the trip to Jacksonville.

Others experienced much more intense or terrifying situations when arriving in North Carolina. When Winston De Vergee’s train arrived in Jacksonville he left the station and walked to the nearest bus stop where he waited for a bus to take him to Camp LeJeune. When the bus arrived, De Vergee got on and was instructed to take the seat directly behind the bus driver. The bus made several stops and as seats filled up, a woman stood next to De Vergee and began to make subtle noises in order to gain the attention of the bus driver. The bus driver pulled the bus over and revealed to De Vergee a small handgun holstered in his belt. The bus driver motioned towards the gun and told De Vergee, “do yourself a favor and go to the back of the bus.”<sup>130</sup>

Edgar Cole’s train stopped close enough to Jacksonville that he was instructed to wait at a nearby street corner until a Marine Corps truck arrived to transport him to the camp. Cole stood at the corner, “and I stood and I stood and I stood and finally I sensed some lights turning the corner from my left and the way the car was turning the corner, I just kind of knew that I was the target.” Unfortunately, the lights did not come from a United States Marine Corps truck. Cole had a nervous feeling that it was a police car “and I froze because at that time in America, police beat up on African American males just for fun. And in that small town, that time of morning and here they’re coming.” He did his best to reassure himself that he would be fine considering he had his orders to report to Marine Corps boot camp. The police car pulled up beside Cole and both officers

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<sup>130</sup> De Vergee, 35.

slowly got out and confronted him. One officer asked Cole what he was doing so Cole, “proudly reached and gave him my order, he snapped it out of my hand and it fell on the street. I said now what am I going to do?” The officer aggressively asked Cole the question again and Cole responded, “well, I’ve been drafted by the Marines and I’m waiting to be picked up.” The officer refused to believe Cole, “You’re not in the Marines!...You’re lying. Why are you still standing here?” Cole continued to try to explain to the officer that he was on his way to Marine Corps boot camp and that he could show him proof if he could pick up his orders from the ground. The officer threatened Cole, “I’ll tell you what boy, we’re going to go around this block one more time, when we get back you’d better not still be standing here.” After the police officers left it became a race to see whether they would arrive again first or the Marine Corps truck would make it in time to save the stranded recruit. Cole stood there, “my heart is pumping, I’m looking here for the police car, I’m looking there for the truck, who is going to get there first? So, what seemed like an eternity, but I knew it wasn’t, after awhile I heard this rumble, you know, those military trucks, I thought I heard the truck, I looked...it took awhile to see the lights because at the times the lights were half-shaded so they couldn’t be seen from the air, so I looked and I said oh, there’s the truck. I looked, no police car, that’s the truck and the truck got closer and closer and I said gee, I’m going to have a friend here now, you know.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Edgar Cole interview, USMC.

Coming from Boston, Joseph Smith disappointingly referred to his rough trip to the South as “my introduction to entering the Marine Corps.”<sup>132</sup> Edgar Cole thought, “here I am, young American, 18 years old, going into the Marine Corps to lay down my life for my country if necessary and I’m being threatened...and I couldn’t do anything about it.”<sup>133</sup> Life for the African American recruits would not get any easier. As they took their buses the final stretch to their destination, a drab, unimpressive land of pine trees, insects, bears, and worst of all, Drill Instructors, awaited. The treatment of the Marine Corps Drill Instructors would be churlish and borderline savage and the threats would continue. But they had made to their final destination where they would suffer through intense training on their way to earning the title of United States Marine.

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<sup>132</sup> Joseph Smith interview, USMC.

<sup>133</sup> Edgar Cole interview, USMC.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### HE WILL SMILE AND SMILE AND WORK ALL MANNER OF EVIL AGAINST THEE

While the recruitment of African American men began on June 1, 1942, the first enlistees were scheduled to arrive on August 26. On that date, 25 cooks, bakers, and barbers were scheduled to report for training, followed by 100 men on September 2 and 3. Another 125 recruits were to arrive between September 16 and 17 and after that the Marine Corps recruiting and training plans called for 200 recruits to arrive in the middle of each month until a maximum number of African American recruits was reached.

Montford Point was officially opened on August 18, 1942, although the camp was nothing to fawn over. The camp consisted of five and a half square miles of land surrounded by thick pine forests. Beyond the forest to the north “was Highway 24, to the south the point of land that gave the area its name thrust into the New River, to the west was the river, Wilson Bay, and the town of Jacksonville, and to the east was Scales Creek, which had notorious areas of quicksand.”<sup>134</sup> The large clearing that was the camp consisted of “a headquarters building (#100), a chapel, two warehouses, a theatre building with two wings, which later housed a library, barber shop, (and) classification room on one side and a recreation slop chute (beer hall) on the other, a dispensary building, a mess hall, designated by the recruits as “The Greasy Spoon,” quarters and facilities for the SES personnel, a small steam generating plant, a small motor transport

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<sup>134</sup> Donnelly and Shaw, 5.

compound, a small officers club, and 120 green prefabricated huts, each designed for billeting 16 men.”<sup>135</sup>

Though the camp had what it needed to operate, it did not impress the recruits who were hoping for a little more grandeur. Reactions ranged from dread to practical. Upon laying his eyes on the camp Reuben McNair “thought I’d done fell in hell.”<sup>136</sup> Walter Thompson Jr. remembered, “Oh, it was a bad scene. Because when you got to the gate it was nothing there. (The gate) was handmade and rocks and bricks...the flagpole was a skinned pine tree...we didn’t see nothing when we got off the bus.”<sup>137</sup> Andrew Miles added that “I was kind of surprised at the barracks that they had put up for us. It wasn’t quite what I expected. It was like they just throwed them up and tacked them together.”<sup>138</sup> James Ferguson on the other hand was much more practical in his assessment of the camp, “Montford Point was a typical military type camp with bunks, drill field, and military back in those days was harsh. There was a war going on, so there was no fancy trimmings, like peace time barracks where’s everybody living good.”<sup>139</sup>

Along with the opening of the camp on August 18, 1942, Headquarters and Service Battery of the 51<sup>st</sup> Composite Defense Battalion was activated with Colonel Samuel Woods as battalion commander. Woods’s executive officer and officer in charge of recruit training was Lieutenant Colonel Theodore A. Holdahl, a former enlisted man who previously held posts in China, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and British Guiana.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>136</sup> Reuben McNair interview, USMC.

<sup>137</sup> Walter Thompson interview, McLaurin, 65.

<sup>138</sup> Andrew Miles interview, USMC.

<sup>139</sup> James Ferguson interview, USMC.

Headquarters and Service Battery was initially staffed with all white personnel. Of the 23 commissioned officers, there were a few older, experienced officers and warrant officers but most were second lieutenants fresh out of officer training. There were also 90 enlisted men assigned to Montford Point to supervise and train the new African American recruits. This group was known as Special Enlisted Staff (SES) personnel and was made up of highly experienced and knowledgeable staff non-commissioned officers, sergeants, and corporals. There were also a few private first class and privates who filled billets in administrative, support, and motor transport roles.<sup>140</sup>

Marine Corps recruit training, whether it takes place at Montford Point, Parris Island, or San Diego, is not meant to prepare recruits for their occupational specialty. It is meant to mold them into team-focused, disciplined Marines prepared to handle the hardships that come along with that title. To accomplish this, Drill Instructors needed to “knock the new recruit off balance, keep him on the run, hammer at him physically and psychologically day and night...”<sup>141</sup> When available, a Drill Instructor would greet the recruits at the Jacksonville train or bus station and accompany the recruit to the base. At initial contact, the Drill Instructor seemed amiable towards the recruits, however, “every recruit runs into and realizes the very same thing, and that is that the DI who comes to meet you at the train station or at the bus station is a very nice fellow until the bus crosses over into base...”<sup>142</sup> Robert Little described “when we entered that gate and left and then came through, hell broke loose.”<sup>143</sup> A recruit known as “Private Brown” undoubtedly

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<sup>140</sup>Donnelly and Shaw, 4-5.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>142</sup> Herman Darden interview, Shaw.

<sup>143</sup> Robert Little interview, USMC.

had the same impression as Little. When “Private Brown” arrived at Montford Point the MP on duty greeted the new recruit with, “Mack, you don’t know what you are coming into.” Unfazed and ignorant of the situation, “Private Brown” responded by calling the MP “Mack” which drew a threat of physical violence from the MP. Still unperturbed, “Private Brown” scoffed at the threat. Suddenly, “That Joe grabbed me and my hat fell off and he shook me til I was weak, then he stepped on my hat and put it in the G.I. can. Then I was learning the score, so I wouldn’t say anything.”<sup>144</sup>

Nathaniel Tyus remembers crossing the line onto base and being told by the Drill Instructor accompanying the group, “you see that dog out there? Say, that dog got more respect than you.” Tyus’s inhospitable welcome to Montford Point did not end there. During his intake interview, Tyus made the fatal mistake of simply replying “yes” to a Marine, “next thing I knew, PFC about 5’2” bouncing, ‘I’ll kick your butts clean out the Marine Corps you no good – get him outta here!’ Boy, I was so scared. I didn’t know what happened. He grabbed me and I thought about what my grandmother said to me that I was sorry that I volunteered with the Marine Corps, you know?”<sup>145</sup>

While many unfortunate recruits quickly experienced the full wrath of the grizzled Marine Corps Drill Instructor, others were frightened into obedience after observing fellow recruits receiving punishment. As Alpha Gainous arrived to camp he watched “the ones that was on punishment, they would have to stand with just their button underwear on and it was in the summertime where the mosquitoes could eat them.

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<sup>144</sup> Author Unknown, “My Military Experience Since ‘43”, Clyde Morrow Personal Papers, COLL/5493, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

<sup>145</sup> Nathaniel Tyus interview, USMC.

And when I saw it, I thought that was the most horrible thing I ever saw in my life.”<sup>146</sup> Stanley Costley was formed up alongside a newly arrived group of recruits when ““A little sergeant comes out naturally, and we had some pretty big guys standing there from the South and what not and he says “Attention!” Well, I knew from school at the gym, a lot of these country boys didn’t know what he meant. And he grabbed the biggest guy in there and threw him on the floor and...to get his attention, you know? So that’s what kind of shook us up, that kind of treatment. So naturally he fell in line like everybody else.”<sup>147</sup>

After shedding their civilian clothes and receiving their issued gear and a haircut, new recruits would be assigned to their platoons. Once platoons consisted of 30 to 40 recruits they would be handed over to the Drill Instructors who would take them through their training. The platoons were numbered in sequence of when they began their training. For example, Alex Johnson was in the 8<sup>th</sup> Platoon, Norman Sneed was in the 44<sup>th</sup> Platoon, and Adolphus Griffith was in the 151<sup>st</sup> Platoon. The only exception to this was the first three platoons that began training in September 1942. These three platoon would later be known as the “Mighty” 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoons. All three platoons were made up of 40 recruits and began training at the same time. Boot camp initially consisted of thirteen weeks of training but was whittled down to as few as eight weeks as the war in the Pacific wore on and replacement were needed at a faster pace. For most African American recruits the training was rough but uneventful for the most part. According to Charles Foreman, “my experience in the boot camp was very typical. We went through

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<sup>146</sup> Alpha Gainous interview, USMC.

<sup>147</sup> Stanley Costley interview, USMC.

the routine of getting the haircuts and the drill instructors and we were assigned to pasteboard huts, that's what they were. But at any rate they were huts, and we were assigned to platoons, and I was assigned to the 12<sup>th</sup> platoon. I think at that time it was probably about 800 or more men in the Marine Corps, and we went through the basic training of everything you go through rifle range, the experience of hiking and so forth – well, hiking, we call it hiking now but they were marches, training marches, and we had to learn a lot of what was then the Marine Corps manual. We were supposed to learn something about the Marine Corps and it was very, very typical.”<sup>148</sup> Stanley Porter's training consisted of “constant drill, constant drill when we got up in the morning. You know, after we were put into platoons. Manual drill, slapping that rifle, getting up in the morning, obeying the commands...”<sup>149</sup> Charles Pain described boot camp as “a lot of calisthenics, a lot of marching. You had to, you know, get up early in the morning, shake your blankets, you had to be at the chow hall at a certain time, back on the field at a certain time. And, uh, we went through in the winter time. And we had to take cold showers and boy, you know what? You couldn't – you were glad to get in the shower because you, you were working all day and you were exhausted and everything.”<sup>150</sup> John Ross Griffin offered a general daily schedule most likely experienced by the African American recruits:

5:15 A.M. – Reveille  
5:30 A.M. – Clean up the barrack  
5:35 A.M. – Roll call  
5:35-5:40 A.M. – Drill to the parade ground

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<sup>148</sup> Charles Foreman interview, USMC.

<sup>149</sup> Stanley Porter interview, USMC.

<sup>150</sup> Charles Pain interview, USMC.

5:40-6:00 A.M. – Exercise  
6:05 A.M. – Breakfast  
6:30-7:30 A.M. – Police the area  
7:30-8:00 A.M. – Sick call  
8:00-11:00 A.M. – Military training  
11:10 A.M. – Return to quarters awaiting lunch  
11:15 A.M.-12:15 P.M. – Lunch  
12:20-3:30 P.M. – Military training  
3:30-5:00 P.M. – Dinner  
5:05-10:00 P.M. – Washing clothes, clean rifle, writing letters, study Marine  
Corps handbook  
10:00 P.M. – Taps<sup>151</sup>

While the sore extremities and exhaustion were constants within the daily life of Marine Corps boot camp, it was the actions of the Drill Instructors that left the African American recruits with indelible memories.

Typically, there would be one lead Drill Instructor and one assistant Drill Instructor known as an “Acting Jack” at any time during recruit training. However, Drill Instructors were often rotated out in order for the SES personnel to gain experience working with African American recruits. Obie Hall remembered, “all through my training I had three or four DIs...”<sup>152</sup> While these old time, white Marine Drill Instructors were essential in training the newly arrived African American recruits, they did not stay for long. The leadership at Montford Point worked diligently to identify African American recruits for rapid promotion which would allow the white Marines to rejoin their previous units and deploy to the Pacific where their expertise and leadership was sorely needed. Therefore, many African American recruits who showed potential were promoted to the

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<sup>151</sup> John Ross Griffin, “My Life in the Marine Corps”, John Griffin File, COLL/3059, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

<sup>152</sup> Obie Hall interview, Shaw.

“Acting Jack” position and then lead Drill Instructor before their training had been completed. The first African American recruit to gain this responsibility was Edgar Huff, followed in rapid succession by Thomas Brokaw, Charles Allen, Gilbert Johnson, Arnold Bostic, Mortimer Cox, Edgar Davis Jr., and George Jackson. Some African American recruits thought this was a positive change for their personal well-being and believed that they would be treated better by the African American Drill Instructors. However, they would soon find out that wasn’t the case. When Joseph Carpenter began his training, “they put us in these huts and the next morning, incidentally, we had black DIs at that time. There were still a few whites around, but basically, the black DIs were now taking over. We thought that would be good, but we found that worse than having the white DIs, ‘cause they, the blacks, were determined to make us succeed and to be real Marines.”<sup>153</sup> Harry Hamilton held a similar sentiment, “at that time they had brought in the Blacks and...they wanted us to measure up to the Corps standards. And they were pretty rough on us at that time...if one guy messed up, the whole platoon would have to suffer. One time he had us scrubbing the wash area with toothbrush. And you’d get on your knees and you’d have these scrubbing just like you were using a mop or a broom. It was quite an ordeal.”

Whether the Drill Instructor was white or African American, the recruits could not escape the harsh treatment of Marine Corps training. Gilbert Johnson eloquently stated of the Drill Instructors and boot camp, “Discipline seemed to have been their lone stock in trade, and they applied it with a vengeance...The individual who, upon his initial

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<sup>153</sup> Joseph Carpenter, McLaurin, 50.

indoctrination in the Marine Corps, at that time, if he felt that he couldn't take it, that was a cue to his exit. But the sum total of this was, he didn't have an exit. So there was only one thing to do, that was grin, shape up, or ship out."<sup>154</sup> When Edgar Huff's Drill Instructor counted heads the first morning of training. After confirming that all recruits were present, the Drill Instructor let the recruits know he was "going to make you wish you had never joined this damn Marine Corps."<sup>155</sup> The Marine Corps Drill Instructors strove to do just that and wasted no time in attempting to accomplishing this goal.

On the first night of Obie Hall's training, a fellow recruit had managed to steal "a bottle of wine from somewhere and the DI told everybody to get out of the barracks." The recruits were instructed to grab their issued equipment and start marching, The Drill Instructors, "marched us all night long 'til the morning. And them shoes...I'm telling you, it was hot. I said, 'what am I doing in this place?' Get us out; there's no peace in the Marine Corps, no feeling, no nothing." This trepidation was felt by all recruits and would continue throughout their training. Lee Ward's began during the platoon's first time practicing drill movements and the "assistant told me to look at my fingers, and I was looking at my fingers..." The Drill Instructor asked Ward why he was looking at his fingers. Ward attempted to explain that assistant had told him to do so, "but the next thing I knew I was inside the barracks through the wall, the hut wall that we had at the Montford Point, and I was inside of it! I made a big hole in the wall, but I went through it. He threw me through it...After that, he asked me, 'Do you like that?' I'm supposed to

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<sup>154</sup> Gilbert Johnson interview, Shaw.

<sup>155</sup> Edgar Huff interview, Shaw.

say ‘Yes Sir!’ I said, ‘No, I don’t like it!’ The next thing I know, his boot was under my chin, and he twisted my arm. He asked me, ‘Do you like it?’ I said, ‘No, I don’t like it!’ He wrenched my arm some more and said, ‘Do you like that?’ I said, ‘No, I don’t like it!’ All the kids in my platoon were saying, ‘Say Yes Sir! Say Yes Sir!’ I never did. He finally let me alone.”<sup>156</sup> Norman Preston, “never will forget, Sergeant Young, he was a huge monster and our little hut was about 100 feet from his office and whenever he got ready to go on liberty, he would stand on the front step of the barracks and he’d say, fall out (whispers)...you can’t hear that. And all of a sudden, he would holler out again, he said, don’t you...hear what I said? And he’d run you in and out that hut until he got tired.”<sup>157</sup>

With many recruits coming from the same area, a few were bound to run into those they knew growing up. This chance meeting between old friends would not always turn out well. Theodore Britton “ran into a friend who had been in high school with me. When I saw him, of course, my first impulse was to say, ‘Hey George! Hey George!’ But he was wearing a black (DI) tag and I was wearing a white (recruit) tag. He reminded me, in no uncertain terms, that he was an officer and that I had to learn how to address an officer, I had to come to attention and with that, when he gave the signal, I started running in all directions. I swore I’d never speak to him again.” Britton did run into George again, this time under different circumstances. After graduating boot camp, George, “was the first one to rush over and grab me and hug me. I didn’t want to talk to

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<sup>156</sup> Lee Ward interview, USMC.

<sup>157</sup> Norman Preston interview, USMC.

him, but I realized that's part of the way Marine life is."<sup>158</sup> After their experiences with the Drill Instructors during boot camp, many of the recruits felt the same as Britton. Ernest Smith's Drill Instructor "was strict. He put us through the paces. He didn't take any nonsense from us. He did his job well, even so much that towards the end we hated his guts!" Smith's platoon built up the courage to tell their Drill Instructor what they thought of him after training had been completed. The Drill Instructor responded, "Well, I'm here to teach you to become killers, and I think I succeeded." For Smith, "that gave us an altogether different impression of him and of his job." Stanley Porter understood the situation, understood what the Drill Instructors had to do to ensure the men were ready to be Marines. But he will never forget, "the harsh voices, the commanding voices, the tones of almost death ringing in your soul, you know, you were told that you were here to obey and you were lucky."<sup>159</sup>

After the African American recruits graduated boot camp and became Marines, they were transferred to various sections throughout Montford Point to begin further occupational training. If a Marine came into the Corps already possessing necessary skills, such as blacksmiths or cooks, they were immediately put to work. The first graduates of boot camp at Montford Point were funneled into the 51<sup>st</sup> Composite Defense Battalion, which eventually dropped the "composite" designation to become an ordinary battalion consisting of a 155mm Artillery Group, 90mm Antiaircraft Artillery Group, Special Weapons Group, and Headquarters and Service Battery. Training for the men

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<sup>158</sup> Theodore Britton interview, USMC.

<sup>159</sup> Stanley Porter interview, USMC.

assigned to the guns intensified immediately. They received extensive training on the weapons systems, fire control equipment, searchlights, and a slew of different types of equipment essential to the operation of airfield and coastal defense, including rangefinders and radio communications. As the population of the camp swelled, Marines from the 51<sup>st</sup> Defense Battalion were promoted and transferred to other leadership or administrative positions around the camp or with other newly formed units. The new units consisted of a second Defense Battalion, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Defense Battalion, Ammunition Companies, and Depot Companies. The role of the Ammunition Companies while on American soil was to protect ammunition depots. The company would perform the same task while overseas but they would also be responsible for delivering ammunition to front line troops in action. The Depot Companies could easily be described as a supply and stevedore unit. These units would unload ships of essential non-munition supplies, store and guard the supplies, and deliver them as necessary. Newly minted Marines assigned to these units would also take over camp roles such as Military Policeman in order to make Montford Point completely staffed by African American personnel.

On rare occasions, Marines would receive a seven or ten-day furlough to return home after completion of recruit training or during a lull in unit training. James Ferguson “left camp after having been given a eight day furlough. Little did I know that this would be the only furlough I would ever receive as a Marine...It was a great pleasure to see my parents again. The eight days were spent enjoying my freedom and dating my girlfriend. I purchased a used dress blue Marine uniform from Koperwas, a store...Cost was \$45.00. I

only got to wear it about twice while on furlough.”<sup>160</sup> Most Marines would share the same experience as Ferguson while on furlough. However, a few encountered law enforcement officers unaware that the Marine Corps had been enlisting African Americans and accused Marines of impersonating a Marine.

Though many Marines did not receive a furlough they at least received the next best thing, weekend liberty. Weekend liberty meant venturing out to the nearest town, Jacksonville, North Carolina. Jacksonville is located in Onslow County, an “impoverished, relatively isolated, and completely segregated...rural southern” county that contained no urban areas. In 1940, the county had a population of 17,939, of which 4,862 were African American. In the 1940 census, 13,603 of the county’s residents identified themselves as farmers and most of those toiled on tobacco and cotton farms. Others worked in the timber industry, either lumberjacking in the pine forests or working in the regional sawmills. With limited income possibilities on the farms and in the forests, many residents supplemented their income by harvesting seafood from the Atlantic and the various tidal bays and creeks. Jacksonville was the county seat and had a population of 873. The community was illustrative of the South’s segregationist ideals. A majority of the white residents of Jacksonville were employed at the county courthouse while others worked in other professional fields such as medicine and education. The African Americans in the city worked as “domestics, tradesmen, day laborers, and, of course, teachers in the public schools, where they received a salary much lower than that paid white teachers.” The city’s paved streets ended at the entrance of the African American

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<sup>160</sup> James Ferguson, *The Story of the Ninth Marine Depot Company* (Self Published, 1996), 8.

neighborhood. Even with the prosperity brought by the construction of Camp LeJeune and Montford Point, the county, and by extension Jacksonville, remained dedicated to the harshest forms of segregation and overt racism. Legislation governed segregation in employment, education, churches, hospitals, restaurants, theaters, and transportation. It impelled African American citizens to drink from separate water fountains and swear on separate Bibles in courtrooms. Features of racial segregation “not incorporated in the South’s legal system” were rigidly enforced by local citizens. White residents refused to address African Americans as “Mr. or Mrs.,” forced them to use the back entry to white homes, and required them to sit in the back seat of private automobiles just as they were legally required to sit in the Jim Crow back seats of buses and trains.” Any African American who threatened to challenge the status quo faced the real possibility of coming face to face with a furious lynch mob. Wearing a Marine Corps, or any other military, uniform offered no protection from segregationist attitudes and possible lynch mob violence.<sup>161</sup>

The reality of the situation was not lost on the Marines based at Montford Point. Though it was Joseph Carpenter’s first time in the Deep South, he “was fully aware of the Deep South, ‘cause we’ve heard of all the lynchings. All this was in the papers in D.C., and I grew up in D.C...I had read about the Ku Klux Klans and all that, and we were in the South, in North Carolina.”<sup>162</sup> Despite knowing the state of racial tension in Jacksonville, the Marines had little choice but to at least begin their liberty there. After

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<sup>161</sup> McLaurin, 77-78.

<sup>162</sup> Joseph Carpenter interview, McLaurin, 79.

being released, the Marines had to make their way to a bus stop outside the main gate of the camp. The Marines, like Lawrence Diggs, were forced to sit in the back of the bus, “and if there were white on the bus, they, if they had most of the seats, and you started in the back and you get up to where the whites were sitting, you were not supposed to sit forward in front of them. So we had asked some of the white people to move up, there was some vacant seats up there, you know. And some would and some wouldn’t. And a discussion would ensue, I mean, and if they didn’t want to move up, well, naturally, we wanted to sit down...So some people that was just hard hearted, they’d say, oh, you can sit in the back.”<sup>163</sup> Many times the buses would be filled to capacity with white passengers or the bus driver would simply refuse to allow the Marines to board and drive away. This occurred at both the main gate bus stop and the bus stop in Jacksonville that would allow the Marines to return to camp. Several times a bus driver refused to transport the Marines back to base and caused the Marines to be late reporting back for duty. A handful of times, emboldened Marines tired of the treatment thrust upon them by the bus drivers commandeered the bus, drove back to the camp entrance and abandoned it. Eventually, Marine Corps trucks were used to ensure the Marines at Montford Point could make it to Jacksonville and back without incident.<sup>164</sup>

Once the Marines arrived in Jacksonville, there were few options for entertainment. According to Averitte Corley, options for the Marines in Jacksonville consisted of “one little USO (United Service Organizations)...two or three juke joints,

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<sup>163</sup> Lawrence Diggs interview, McLaurin, 83.

<sup>164</sup> Edgar Huff interview, Shaw.

two or three old taverns that you go to, but going downtown you can forget that. Because people would not accept you downtown.”<sup>165</sup> One man that had little fear of going downtown was Edgar Huff. On April 17, 1943, Corporal Huff was called into Colonel Woods’s office and given a warrant promoting him to sergeant. Colonel Woods told Huff, “to take off and go on liberty and wet down my stripes.” Huff “went to town...went up to Jacksonville and went to a carnival that they had there and bought a bag of popcorn...I was standing alone waiting to go cross the street and I looked around and there were six white Marines had circled me completely.” The white Marines that had encircled Huff were a first lieutenant, two sergeants, and three PFCs or privates. The newly promoted Sergeant Huff noticed “they were wearing the Guadalcanal patch. That was the first time I ever saw a patch in the Marine Corps, that’s why I remember so well.” The first lieutenant said to Huff, “Nigger, who gave you them stripes?” Naturally, Huff was stunned by the actions of the officer, who asked again, “Nigger, I’m talking to you, who gave you them stripes?” Huff responded, “Your mother gave them to me.” The officer demanded the stripes be taken off and reached toward Huff. Sergeant Huff “caught him by his hand and shoulder and broke his arm right across of my leg. At that time a couple of sergeants walked up and struck at me and I hit them. I broke two sergeants jaws, I broke this man, this lieutenant’s arm, and the other two, I broke their ribs, and I took this little small one and I just took him and used him as a damn frailing pole and just kicked the hell out of him and then I threw him...” The white MP on duty attempted to instruct Sergeant Huff to return to base but Huff refused and walked away.

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<sup>165</sup> Corley interview, McLaurin, 81.

After seeing the carnage left behind, the MP knew he was no match for Sergeant Huff. When Sergeant Huff returned to camp for duty two days later, he was told by a warrant officer that Colonel Woods wanted to see him. The warrant officer looked confused and asked Sergeant Huff several times if there was anything physically wrong with him. When Sergeant Huff walked to the passage way leading up to Colonel Woods's office he "saw these six people all lined up there in the hall with their arms in slings and bandaged up and so forth and on and I recognized them as being the same people that we had this fracas downtown." Sergeant Huff reported to the colonel and explained what had happened. After listening intently to Sergeant Huff's side of the incident, Colonel Woods told him, "I don't want you starting no fights, but I'm happy and glad that I do have a sergeant that have and did and can whip six people." Colonel Woods walked out and told the injured white Marines, "I'll let you know to go back and tell the rest of them damn people they better let my boys alone because he just whipped six of you now, one of them did...Get off this post." The colonel then assembled all African American personnel at the theater, told the Marines about Sergeant Huff's fight, and commended Sergeant Huff for his actions.<sup>166</sup> Perhaps it is because of actions like this that Colonel Woods earned the nickname "The Great White Father" among the Montford Point Marines.<sup>167</sup>

As time went on and more Marines would be released for weekend liberty, it was clear Jacksonville was not the best place to let off steam and take in the joys of being away from military life for a short time. Marines began travelling beyond the confines of

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Theodore Peters interview, USMC.

Jacksonville and Onslow County for cities and towns that had larger African American populations and therefore offered a wider range of recreation and establishments to visit. Buses and trains, as well as Marine Corps trucks, transported Marines to places like Kinston, Morehead City, Wilmington, New Bern in North Carolina and Beaufort, South Carolina. But as the war progressed, the Marines at Montford Point became restless. They were eager to leave Montford Point and Jacksonville and experience the thrills of combat. The boredom and repetitiveness of training had taken their toll but a reprieve would soon come for many. The hard work and proficiency shown by the Marines at Montford Point would eventually be rewarded with deployments to little known islands in the Pacific.

## CONCLUSION

The first unit to escape the confines of Montford Point was the 51<sup>st</sup> Defense Battalion. On January 19, 1944, the battalion had departed Montford Point and travelled by rail to Camp Elliott just north of San Diego, California. Twenty-three days later, the Marines of the 51<sup>st</sup> boarded the merchant transport, SS *Meteor*, in San Diego and set sail for the Ellice Islands. The battalion would provide garrisons for Nanomea, Funafuti, and Nukufetau Island and occupy the islands between February 25-27, 1944. In September 1944, the battalion would be transferred to the Marshall Islands where it would stay until relieved in November 1945 after 19 long months on overseas duty and seeing no combat action.

The 52<sup>nd</sup> Defense Battalion would also deploy for overseas duty, arriving in Camp Pendleton on August 24, 1944 and departing for the Marshall Islands on September 21, 1944. A detachment from the battalion was forwarded to Guam on March 24, 1945 where the first combat patrols by African American Marines were conducted. The goal of the patrols was to flush out any Japanese stragglers. The first contact made by one of these patrols occurred on April 1, 1945 and resulted in the killing of one Japanese soldier. Successful patrols on April 13, 21, and 26 resulted in two dead and four wounded Japanese soldiers. As patrols increased, Sergeant Ezra Kelly distinguished himself as proficient in finding and killing the Japanese. Sergeant Kelly was responsible for the first Japanese killed and would eventually rack up five more. The 52<sup>nd</sup> Defense Battalion would return to the states in March 1946.

As it turned out, the Ammunition and Depot companies organized at Montford Point were destined to experience the most combat out of the African American Marine Corps units. During the invasion of Saipan on June 15, 1944, Marines of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ammunition Company came ashore and were immediately forced to dig in by enemy artillery fire. Marines from 3<sup>rd</sup> Ammo filled the line on the beachhead perimeter and helped repulse an enemy counterattack at night. They were also credited with knocking out a Japanese machine gun. However, the company was not without loss. Private First Class Leroy Seals of Brooklyn, New York was wounded and died the next day. However, PFC Seals was not the first African American Marine to be killed in combat. That unfortunate distinction belongs to Private Kenneth Tibbs of Columbus, Ohio. Private Tibbs was an orderly in the 20<sup>th</sup> Depot Company and was killed as the company came ashore on D-Day. Besides the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ammunition Company and 20<sup>th</sup> Depot Company, the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Depot Company also experience extensive combat while on Saipan.

The African American Marines proved themselves valiantly on Saipan. The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General A.A. Vandegrift said about the Marines, “The Negro Marines are no longer on trial. They are Marines, period.” War correspondent Robert Sherrod reported in his column in *Time* that “Negro Marines, under fire for the first time, have rated a universal 4.0 on Saipan.” Marine with the Ammunition and Depot Companies would go on to participate in operations and distinguish themselves in combat on Peleliu, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa.<sup>168</sup> After the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945, several African American Marine units were tasked with occupation duty in Japan and

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<sup>168</sup> Donnelly and Shaw, 16-40.

North China. With the Marine Corps drawing down, units were sent home in earnest and disbanded. On October 31, 1946, the 47<sup>th</sup> and 49<sup>th</sup> Depot Companies and the 8<sup>th</sup> Ammunition Company were the last African American Marine units in the Pacific. By November 25<sup>th</sup>, the 47<sup>th</sup> Depot was disbanded and its remnants absorbed into 8<sup>th</sup> Ammo. On September 30, 1947, both the 49<sup>th</sup> Depot and 8<sup>th</sup> Ammo were deactivated and the Marines were transferred to the Headquarters and Service and Depot Support Companies of the 5<sup>th</sup> Service Depot.<sup>169</sup>

As the Marine Corps began to reduce its manpower through discharges, it still worked to maintain a force of reserves. While several African American Marines with good records were offered the opportunity to continue to serve, few were offered a chance to stay on active duty, most were offered a position in a segregated reserve unit to be established in New York. Men such as Carrel Reavis, Lucas Lawrence, Robert Mason, Theodore Britton and Reuben McNair found that they enjoyed their time in the United States Marine Corps and elected to continue their service. A select few, namely Gilbert “Hashmark” Johnson and Edgar Huff, would achieve the rank of Sergeant Major and solidify their positions as legends in the Marine Corps. However, most were either forced or chose to return to civilian life. Many of these men who were trained at Montford Point went on to have very successful careers outside of the Marine Corps. Winston De Vergee became a New York City police officer and patrolled the very streets where he played football as a youngster. Edgar Cole became a senior executive at Xerox. Andrew Miles started a successful carpentry business. And Ernest Jackson worked his way up in the

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 16-46.

United States Postal Service, retired, went back to college and spent an additional twelve years as a teacher.

From September 1942 until the end of the Second World War, 19,168 African Americans enlisted and served in the United States Marine Corps. Units that were organized consisted of two defense battalions, twelve ammunition companies, and fifty-one depot companies. Approximately 13,000 were deployed overseas where member of seven ammunition companies and twelve depot companies saw combat. Of those African American Marines that deployed to the Pacific, 10 were killed in action, 89 were wounded in action, 2 later died of wounds suffered in combat, 11 were combat fatigue casualties, and 35 died of non-combat related causes.<sup>170</sup>

These were 19,168 men who are today referred to as “The Montford Point Marines.” Unfortunately, grouping these men under the guise of a single label belies the fact that they were individuals and each have their own story to tell. They were born into incredible, and in most cases difficult circumstances. They were raised during the Great Depression but experienced differing levels of economic hardships. They lived through varying degrees of systematic racism depending on the geographic area they were born. Some grew up in stable families raised by a father and mother. Others were raised by single mothers or grandparents. Their motivations for joining the Marine Corps were as diverse as their experiences growing up. While the trip to Montford Point were similar, there were outliers whose experiences were especially distressing. Others simply

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<sup>170</sup> Captain T.N. Greene, “The Negro Marine, 1942-1946,” Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Divison, Quantico, VA.

processed the experience differently based on their familiarity with Jim Crow laws. For all, trials and tribulations did not end when they arrived at Montford Point for recruit training. On base, hardened Marine Corps Drill Instructors worked assiduously to keep the recruits on their toes and in fear of the next, inevitable punishment. The relief provided by graduation vanished as joyful Marines eager to blow off steam were confronted by the entrenched racism of Jacksonville, North Carolina.

In the preface to his memoir *Assignment in Hell*, Winston De Vergee wrote, “I waited patiently before beginning this work with the hope that someone more competent would take this subject in hand; but up till now it has not been done.”<sup>171</sup> De Vergee’s thoughts ring all too true. Over 19,000 men should equate to over 19,000 stories. This, of course, is wishful thinking and impractical. The Marine Corps has done little to expand upon the work that has already been done by Donnelly and Shaw. Historians have found little use in such a niche topic. And while this author has attempted to be that “someone more competent,” he is cognizant of the fact that more can and should be done.

Until the time comes that another historian picks up the oral histories or poorly organized folders slowly accumulating dust on the shelves of the Marine Corps archives, this work will have to do. However, though they may not feel as though they need the recognition, the African American Marines that paved the way for other men and women of color to serve in the Marine Corps should take solace in the fact that they are part of one of the greatest brotherhoods this world has ever seen. And that every day, in San Diego and Parris Island, the next generation of Marines who will carry on the tradition

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<sup>171</sup> De Vergee, xi.

and legacy of the Corps are shouting at the top of their lungs, “THE MONTFORD  
POINT MARINES!”

*Semper Fidelis*

APPENDIX A  
FIRST EPISTLE TO THE PEONS (ACCORDING TO PFC JOSEPH MARVIN GISH)

LO, All ye miserable sinners having entered  
thru the gate of Yammasse into the Land of Khaki,  
hearken unto my words: for I HAVE dwelt in this  
land for many months and mine eyes have witnessed  
all manner of folly and WOE.

Verily have I tasted of the bitter Fruit of  
TS AND drained the dregs of the Cup of Snafu:

Gird up they loins, my sone, and take UP the  
forest green; but act slowly and with exceeding  
care and hearken first to the counsel of a wiser  
and a sadder man than thou:

Beware thou the Sergeant WHO is called TOP;  
he hath a pleased and foolish look but he  
concealeth a serpent in his heart.

Avoid HIM when he speaketh low and his lips  
smileth; he smileth not for thee; his heart  
rejoiceth at THE sight of thy youth and thine  
ignorance:

He will smile and smile and work all manner  
of evil against thee. A wise man shuns the Front  
Office but the fool SHALL dwell in the galley  
forever.

Unto all things there is a time: there is a  
time to speak and a time to be silent: be thou  
like unto stone in the PRESENCE of thy superiors,  
and keep thy tongue still when they shall call for  
volunteers.

The wise man searcheth out the easy details  
but only a fool sticketh out HIS neck.

Look thou with disfavor upon the newly made  
Corporal; he prizeth MUCH his stripes and is proud  
and foolish; he laugheth and joketh much with the  
older noncoms and looketh UPON the private with a

frown.

He would fain go to OCS but he is not qualified.

Know thou that the Sergeant of the Mess is a man of many moods: when HE looketh pleased and his words are like honey, the wise messman seeketh him out and praiseth his chow and laugheth much at his jests:

But when he moveth with great haste and the sweat STANDETH on his brow AND he CURSETH under his breath, make thyself scarce; for he will fall like a whirlwind upon the idle and the goldbrick shall know his wrath.

The Supply Sergeant is a lazy man And worketh not; but he is the keeper of many good things: if thou wouldst wear well-fitting raiment and avoid the Statement of Checkages, MAKE him thy friend.

He prizeth drunkenness ABOVE all things.

He careth not for praise of flattery, but lend him THY lucre and thy liquor and he will love thee.

Hell hath no fury like a Shavetail scorned: he walketh with a swagger and regardeth the enlisted mand with a raised eyebrow; he looketh upon his bars with exceeding pleasure AND loveth a salute mightily.

Act thou lowly unto him and call him sit and he will love thee.

Damned BE he who standeth first in line of chow and shortstoppeth the dessert and cincheth the coffee.

He taketh from the meat dish with a heavy hand and leaveth thee fatty PART.

He is thrice cursed, and all PEOPLE,

even unto the pfcs, will revile him and spit  
upon him: FOR his name is called Chow Hound  
and he is an abomination.

Know thou the Big Operator, but trust  
him not: he WORKETH always upon a deal and  
he speaketh confidentially.

He knoweth many women and goeth into  
town every night: he borroweth call thy  
money: yea, even unto thy laundry coins.

He promiseth to fix thee up, but does  
it not.

Beware thou the Old Man, for he will  
make THEE sweat; when he approacheth, look  
thou on the ball; he loveth to chew upon  
thy posterior.

Keep thou out of his sight and let  
him not KNOW thee by name: for he who doth  
arouse the wrath of the OLD MAN shall go  
many times unto the Chaplain.

SELAH.

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