

Blacks in the Marine Corps



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D.C.

A Living Legend. The drill instructor, or DI, has been called "a Marine's Marine." He leads by example, never asking a recruit to do anything he has not done himself. The DI instructs, guides, and molds his men into basic Marines. He knows that discipline is the difference between success and failure, whether on the battlefield or in garrison. (Official USMC Photo)

BLACKS IN THE MARINE CORPS

By
Henry I. Shaw, Jr.
and
Ralph W. Donnelly



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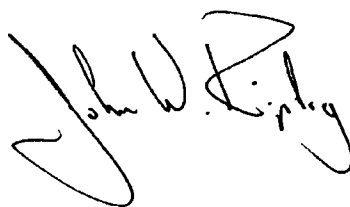
FOREWORD

When this monograph was published almost 30 years ago, then History and Museums Director Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons wrote: "Today's generation of Marines serve in a fully integrated Corps where blacks constitute almost one-fifth of our strength. Black officers, noncommissioned officers, and privates are omnipresent, their service so normal a part of Marine life that it escapes special notice. The fact that this was not always so and that as little as 34 years ago [in 1941] there were no black Marines deserves explanation." This statement holds true for this edition of *Blacks in the Marine Corps*, which has already gone through several previous reprintings.

What has occurred since the first edition of *Blacks in the Marine Corps* has been considerable scholarship and additional writing on the subject that deserve mention to a new generation of readers, both in and outside the Corps. First and foremost is Morris J. MacGregor, Jr.'s *Integration of the Armed Forces 1940-1965* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981) that documents the Armed Forces efforts as part of the Defense Studies Series. The volume is an excellent history of a social topic often difficult for Service historical offices to deal with.

Two other more recent Marine Corps studies include Bernard C. Nalty's *The Right to Fight: African-American Marines in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, 1995) and Colonel Alphonse G. Davis' *Pride, Progress, and Propects: The Marine Corp's Efforts to Increase the Presence of African-American Officers, 1970-1995* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, 2000). One a commemorative publication, the other an occasional paper, they both add new insights and research to the subject building upon Henry I. Shaw, Jr. and Ralph W. Donnelly's initial effort.

The continued interest and success of Donnelly and Shaw's narrative is one reason to continue to make it available. Equally important is the story of the Marine Corps' evolution as an institution that draws strength from the diversity of American society. The complete integration of the Corps was not a single event in the past, but a series of individual and group contributions towards a not always common goal. The success of this effort is measured in today's opportunity for an equal right to serve regardless of race, color, or creed. This is a story that parallels the nation's history.



John W. Ripley
Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps, Retired
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums Division

PREFACE

This has been a difficult history to research. The records of black Marine units are sparse; the administrative correspondence concerning blacks in the Marine Corps is equally scanty. One lucky find was a file of correspondence relating to the efforts to find a place for black Marine barracks detachments in the late 1940s. It came to light as the result of the research efforts of Mr. Morris J. MacGregor of the Army's Center of Military History, who is writing a history of blacks in the Armed Forces for the Department of Defense. A similar unexpected find was several folders of statistical data on black Marines in the 40s and 50s which had been relegated to the back of someone's file drawer in the Manpower Department and happily rediscovered by a person who recognized its historical worth.

The basic information compiled on World War II Marines was gained by a painstaking extraction of data from the monthly muster rolls of black Marine units. The Reference Section of the History and Museums Division has maintained subject files over the years consisting of pertinent newspaper clippings, extracts from official documents, copies of answers of public and official queries, and other valuable miscellaneous pieces of information. Those files pertaining to black Marines were used extensively but with care as to the authenticity of the sources. An assemblage of official documents relating to blacks in the Marine Corps, maintained by the then Personnel Department, and later by the Commandant's Special Assistant on Minority Affairs, was turned over to the Reference Section at the start of the writing of the history.

All apparently pertinent published sources were consulted, but it was soon discovered that very little has been written about black Marines and much of that which has been available is inaccurate. The Camp Lejeune newspaper was read, page by page, from 1942 until 1950 to uncover news of the men of Montford Point. Surprisingly little was published in the way of news stories specifically concerned with black Marines, but the columnists and photographers unwittingly provided a mine of information. A summary history of black Marines which had been prepared in the Historical Branch in 1946, as later enlarged upon by Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth H. Berthoud, Jr., who also added a history of black officers, proved very useful. Colonel Berthoud himself was even more useful as a source of information in his conversations with both authors.

When most of the documentary research had been completed, Mr. Donnelly wrote a first draft of this history. It provided the backbone for much of what is now printed, but it was obvious that more information than could be culled from official sources was needed. To fill the gaps, Mr. Shaw conducted a number of interviews in the summer of 1972 with serving black officers and enlisted men and with black veterans. Key interviews in this series were those with Assistant Secretary of the Navy James E. Johnson, then-Lieutenant Colonel Frank E. Petersen, Jr., Sergeant Major Edgar R. Huff, and retired Sergeant Major Gilbert H. "Hashmark" Johnson. Through the good offices of the Montford Point Marine Association (MMPA), Mr. Shaw was able to hold extensive discussions, both informally and on tape, with members attending the association's 1972 annual meeting. There he benefitted greatly from an extended talk with retired Master Gunnery Sergeant Brooks E. Gray, Jr., first President of the MMPA. Taped interviews were conducted with Marine veterans Herman Darden, Jr., Obie Hall, Alex Johnson, Robert D. Little, and Norman Sneed.

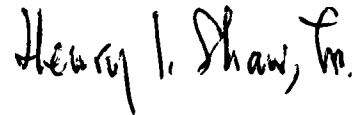
Once the rewrite of the narrative had started, a chance visit from an old friend, Master Gunnery Sergeant Frederick H. Clayton, who had been a classification specialist at Montford Point and with both the 51st and 52d Defense Battalions, provided the answers to several baffling questions. Throughout the writing of the final version of the history, Majors Edward L. Green and Solomon P. Hill were ever ready to provide advice, information, and constructive criticism. Three civilian employees of Headquarters Marine Corps, Joseph H. Carpenter, Charles H. Doom, and David C. Hendricks, all World War II veterans of Montford Point, were particularly helpful in providing background information on personalities and events and in clearing up disputed points about the service of black Marines.

A number of knowledgeable individuals were asked to review the final draft manuscript. The majority of their valuable comments have been incorporated in the text. Active duty reviewers included Colonels Berthoud and Petersen, Majors Green and Hill, and Gunnery Sergeant Roy G. Johnson. Retired and former Marines who read the manuscript included Secretary Johnson, Sergeant Major Huff, Master Gunnery Sergeant Clayton, Mr. Carpenter, and Mr. Hendricks. Dr. Robert Humphrey of the USMC Human Relations Institute at San Diego had the text reviewed by "my best two black advisors in the Corps" and provided their comments. Dr. Charles W. Simmons, Head of the History and Geography Department at Norfolk State College and former sergeant major of the 51st Defense Battalion, was particularly helpful in his review. Mr. MacGregor, drawing on his considerable background in recent black military history, furnished many useful and constructive comments. All members of the 1973-74 Commandant's Advisory Committee on Marine Corps History read and critiqued the manuscript including Major General Donald M. Weller, USMC (Retired), Chairman, Major General Norman J. Anderson, USMC (Retired), Colonel Frederick S. Aldridge, USMC (Retired), Dr. Gordon A. Craig, Dr. Philip K. Lundeborg, and Mr. Robert L. Sherröd.

The editorial review of the manuscript was made by Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, Director of Marine Corps History and Museums, and Colonel Herbert M. Hart, Deputy Director for Marine Corps History. The typing of the manuscript through its various drafts was the responsibility in succession of Miss Cynthia L. Brown, Lance Corporal Carl W. Rice, and Miss Catherine A. Stoll. Miss Stoll and PFC Denise L. Alexander prepared the index for the printer. The maps, charts, and cover copy for the history were prepared by Staff Sergeant Paul A. Lloyd. Unless otherwise noted, official Department of Defense photographs were used throughout the text.



RALPH W. DONNELLY



HENRY I. SHAW, JR.

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to President Harry Truman's 1948 declaration of intent to end segregation in the U.S. Armed Forces, blacks who served most often did so in segregated units or under a quota system designed to limit their number. In time of war, the need for men usually required the recruitment or drafting of blacks; in peacetime the number of black servicemen dwindled. In large part, the situation of blacks in uniform was a reflection of their status in society, particularly that part of American society which practiced racial segregation and discrimination.

During the American Revolution blacks served in small numbers in both the Continental and state navies and armies. According to surviving muster and pay rolls, there were at least three blacks in the ranks of the Continental Marines and ten others who served as Marines on ships of the Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania navies.¹ It is probable that more blacks served as Marines in the Revolution who were not identified as such in the rolls. The first recorded black Marine in the Continental service was John Martin or "Keto," a slave of William Marshall of Wilmington, Delaware, who was recruited without Marshall's knowledge or permission by Marine Captain Miles Pennington in April 1776. Martin served on board the Continental brig *Reprisal* until October 1777 when the ship foundered off the Newfoundland Banks. All of her crew except the cook were lost.²

On 27 August 1776, Isaac Walker, identified on the rolls as a Negro, was enlisted in Captain Robert Mullan's company of Continental Marines in Philadelphia, and on 1 October, a recruit listed simply as "Orange . . . Negro" was enrolled. Both of these men were still on the company payroll as of 1 April 1777.³ It is quite possible that they served with Mullan's unit in the Second Battle of Trenton (Assunpink Creek) on 2 January 1777 and in the Battle of Princeton the following day.

Those few black men who have been identified as Marines from surviving Revolutionary War rosters were pioneers who were not followed by others of their race until 1 June 1942. The Continental Marines went out of existence within a year after the Treaty of Paris was signed on 11 April 1783. When Congress conditionally authorized the construction of six frigates for a new Navy in 1794, Marine guards were part of the planned ships' complements. In 1797, after the completion of three of the frigates, *Constitution*, *Constellation*, and *United States*, was authorized, Marines were actually enlisted. The Secretary of War, who also supervised the Navy, on 16 March 1798 prescribed a set of rules governing the enrollment of Marines for the *Constellation* which provided that "No Negro, Mulatto or Indian to be enlisted. . . ." ⁴

These regulations prohibiting the enlistment of Negroes were continued when Congress, on 11 July 1798, reestablished a separate Marine Corps with a major in command. The new Commandant, Major William Ward Burrows, was explicit on the subject in his instructions to his recruiting officers. To Lieutenant John Hall at Charleston, South Carolina, he wrote:

You may enlist . . . as many Drummers and Fifers as possible, I do not care what Country the D & Fifers are of but you must be careful not to enlist more Foreigners than as one to three natives. You can make use of Blacks and Mulattoes while you recruit, but you cannot enlist them.⁵

The regulations for recruiting Marines were much more selective than those for seamen because of the reliance on the small guards on board ship to maintain discipline, prevent mutinies, and give a military tone to men-of-war. This situation was, in part, a carry over from the experience of British Marines, about whom the observation had been made a hundred years earlier:

It may be added to what has been said of the usefulness of the said [Marine] Regimt that the whole body of seamen on board the Fleet, being a loose collection of undisciplined people, and (as experience shows) sufficiently inclined to mutiny, the Marine Regimts will be a powerful check to their disorders, and will be able to prevent the disastrous consequences that may thence result to their Mats [Majesties] service.⁶

Certainly those instrumental in recreating the American Navy had before them the spectacle and lesson of the British Navy's Spithead and Nore mutinies of April and May 1797 and the part played by Marines in their suppression.

There is no known record of black Marines serving in the various wars of the 19th Century. The Navy did frequently enlist blacks as seamen, so much so that at one time in 1839 the Secretary of the Navy issued a directive that no more than five percent of enlistees could be blacks.⁷ Thousands of blacks served in the Federal Army and Navy during the Civil War and some continued to serve thereafter—in the Army's case in two black infantry and two black cavalry regiments which fought the Indians on the western frontier.

Mixed crews with blacks in all ratings remained a feature of the Navy up until World War I, when the majority of black volunteers were assigned to the Messman Branch. Following the war, black recruitment in the Navy ceased for more than a decade and when it resumed in 1932, blacks were again only enlisted in the Messman Branch.⁸ The Army used blacks in segregated units in World War I and continued the practice following the war. At the onset of American involvement in World War II, the segregation of blacks in the Armed Forces continued. Black Army volunteers and draftees were assigned to all-black units. The Navy restricted its black volunteers to steward duty and the Marine Corps accepted no blacks at all.

CHAPTER 1

A CHOSEN FEW

The door was opened for blacks to serve in all branches of the Armed Forces on 25 June 1941 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 8802 establishing the Fair Employment Practices Commission with this statement:

In affirming the policy of full participation in the defense program by all persons regardless of color, race, creed, or national origin, and directing certain action in furtherance of said policy . . . all departments of the government, including the Armed Forces, shall lead the way in erasing discrimination over color or race.¹

Major General Commandant Thomas Holcomb appointed Brigadier General Thomas E. Watson to represent the Marine Corps on the newly established commission, and the Corps took preliminary steps to comply with the President's Executive Order. There is no question but that the order was unpopular at Headquarters Marine Corps. Faced with the necessity of expanding the Corps to meet the threatening war situation, few, if any, of the Marine leaders were interested in injecting a new element into the training picture. There was serious doubt that blacks would meet the high standards of the Marine Corps. Once war had broken out, this opposition stiffened. The Commandant, in testimony before the General Board of the Navy on 23 January 1942, indicated that it had long been his considered opinion that "there would be a definite loss of efficiency in the Marine Corps if we have to take Negroes . . ."²

General Holcomb also indicated that the Marine Corps did not have the facilities or trained personnel to handle all the whites who wanted to join after Pearl Harbor. If there were to be black Marine units, he noted that he could use only "the best type of officer on this project, because it will take a great deal of character and technique to make the thing a success, and if it is forced upon us we must make it a success."³ The need for experienced

noncommissioned officers (NCOs) in training blacks was equally acute and the Commandant felt that "they simply can not be spared if we are going to be ready for immediate service with the fleet."⁴ Concluding his remarks, he said, "the Negro race has every opportunity now to satisfy its aspirations 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."⁵

Regardless of the Commandant's private protests, the pressure was on from the White House and from other public sources to get on with the enlistment of blacks for general duty in the Navy and Marine Corps. Wendell L. Wilkie, the titular head of the Republican Party, in a speech delivered at the Freedom House inaugural dinner on 19 March 1942, described the Navy's "racial bias" in excluding blacks from enlisting except as mess attendants as a "mockery." He challenged, "Are we always as alert to practice [democracy] here at home as we are to proclaim it abroad?"⁶

The Administration's answer, delivered by Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox on 7 April, was that the Navy, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps would soon accept blacks for enlistment for general service in active duty reserve components. Actual recruitment would begin when suitable training sites were established.⁷ Secretary Knox's statement was followed on 20 May by an announcement from the Navy Department that on 1 June the Navy would begin recruiting 1,000 blacks a month for shore and high seas service and that during June and July a complete battalion of 900 blacks would be formed by the Marine Corps.⁸

This was to be a new experience for the Marine Corps. One officer recalled:

. . . when the colored came in, we had the appropriations and the authority, and we could have gotten 40,000 white people. It just scared us to death when the colored were put on it. I went over to Selective Service and saw General Hershey, and he turned me

over to a lieutenant colonel [Campbell C. Johnson?—that was in April—and he was one grand person. I told him, “Eleanor [Mrs. Roosevelt] says we gotta take in Negroes, and we are just scared to death; we’ve never had any in; we don’t know how to handle them; we are afraid of them.” He said, “I’ll do my best to help you get good ones. I’ll get the word around that if you want to die young, join the Marines. So anybody that joins [has] got to be pretty good!” And it was the truth. We got some awfully good Negroes.⁹

The Beginnings

In the course of a study prepared on the possible uses of blacks in the Marine Corps by Brigadier General Keller E. Rockey, Director of the Division of Plans and Policies, the possibility that they might be employed in a messmen’s branch, similar to the Navy’s, was considered, but the Corps at that time did not have such a branch. Strong doubts were expressed that blacks could serve successfully in combat units, citing the Army’s experience that the General Classification Test scores of the majority of black recruits showed low levels of learning aptitude.¹⁰ The Marine Corps actually had little choice in the matter. The die had been cast. There would be blacks in the Marine Corps and some at least would serve in combat units. The initial vehicle for that service would be a composite defense battalion, a unit containing seacoast artillery, antiaircraft artillery, infantry, and tanks, whose task was overseas base defense.

Units of this type, their organization always tailored to their mission, were already deployed overseas and had seen combat. Out-numbered elements of the 1st Defense Battalion had gallantly defended Wake Island from invading Japanese. Other units of the 1st on Johnson and Palmyra and of the 3d and 6th Battalions on Midway had engaged enemy ships and planes with seacoast defense and antiaircraft guns.¹¹

As General Holcomb had pointed out to the General Board, the selection of an officer to head the black unit, in fact to oversee all black Marine training, was crucial. The choice was a wise and fortunate one. Colonel Samuel A. Woods, Jr., a native of South Carolina and a graduate of The Citadel, had some 25 years experience as an officer, including service in France in World War I, duty in Cuba, China, the Dominican Republic, and the Philippines, and service with the fleet.¹² In addition to a varied and well rounded career, he had personal qualities that made him a memorable



Colonel Samuel A. Woods, Jr., first Commanding Officer, 51st Composite Defense Battalion and Montford Point Camp. (USMC Photo 9511).

man to the first black Marines. Almost universally they speak of him with respect and affection. In the words of one black NCO who served closely with him, his most outstanding quality was “his absolute fairness. He would throw the book at you if you had it coming, but he would certainly give you an opportunity to prove yourself.”¹³

Colonel Woods, basing his findings upon a General Board report to Secretary Knox of 20 March, presented his plans for the program to be established for black Marines to General Rockey on 21 April. He based his concept on a minimum of 1,000 black reserve recruits to be equipped as a defense battalion after six months. Training was to be conducted at Mumford Point (later renamed Montford Point) at the Marine Barracks, New River, North Carolina. The barracks, soon to be named Camp Lejeune, was already the major east coast combat training site for Fleet Marine Force (FMF) units and it would soon be the only training site for black Marines. The sum of \$750,000 was allotted to construct and enlarge temporary barracks and supporting facilities for the new camp at Montford Point.

Some of the colonel’s plan came to fruition,

other parts were changed to meet the circumstances at Montford Point. Basically, however, a headquarters and service battery and one or more recruit training batteries would be formed as the initial camp complement. The first recruits to report would have cooking experience. It was expected that boot camp and basic training would take 180 days. At the end of this time, the black Marines would receive combat equipment and organize for training as a composite defense battalion. The first appointments of black NCOs would be made at about the same time.

Colonel Woods recognized the battalion's table of organization contained "some ranks which normally require considerable experience and more than 12 years' service to attain."¹⁴ Since the unit was eventually to be composed entirely of black enlisted men and white officers, blacks would have to learn on the job to fill all NCO billets. Promotion was to be governed by length of service, experience, and demonstrated ability, and controlled by changes in the training allowance for the battalion.¹⁵

Recruiting was to begin on 1 June 1942. Although the public announcement was not made until 20 May, the basic instructions for Marine Corps Recruiting Divisions were sent out in a letter from the Commandant on 15 May. This letter set a quota of 200 recruits each from the Eastern and Central Divisions while the Southern was to furnish 500 of the initial 900 recruits. These men were to be citizens between 17 and 29 years of age, and they were to meet the existing standards for enlistment in the Corps. They were to be enlisted in Class III (c), Marine Corps Reserve, and assigned to inactive duty in a General Service Unit of their Reserve District. Both the service record book and the enlistment contract were to be stamped "Colored."¹⁶

When recruiting opened on 1 June, the first men to enlist were Alfred Masters and George O. Thompson (1 June), George W. James and John E. L. Tillman (2 June), Leonard L. Burns (3 June), and Edward A. Culp (5 June), all in the 8th Reserve District, headquartered at Pensacola, Florida. On 8 June, James W. Brown in the 3d District (New York) and George L. Glover and David W. Sheppard in the 6th and 7th Districts (Charleston) enlisted. From then on the number on the rolls gradually rose, with the instructions to recruiters that the first men to be sent to Montford Point would be those

who had skills that would help ready the camp for those to follow.

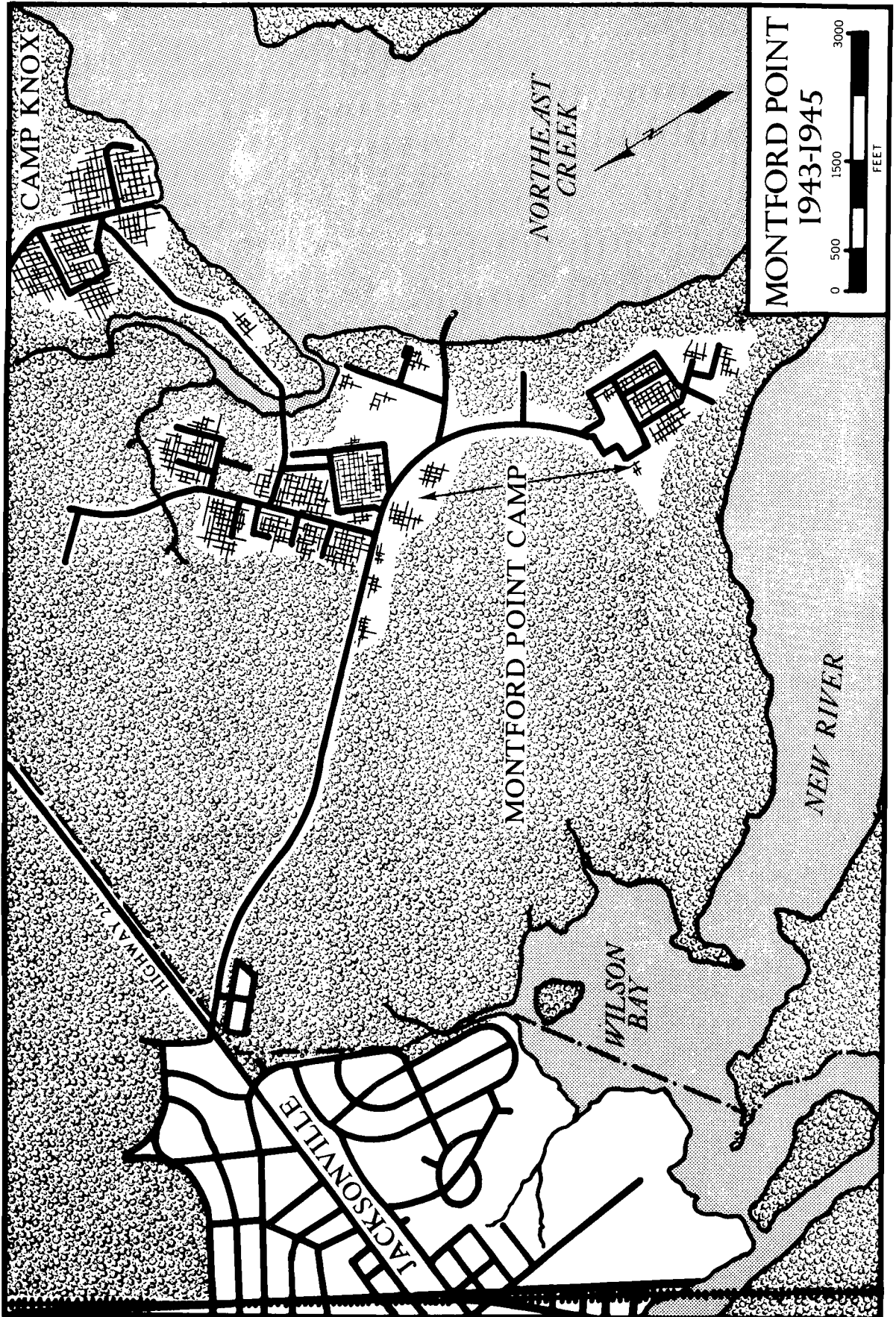
The majority of the recruits were well motivated to join the Marine Corps. One recruit, Edgar R. Huff, from Gadsden, Alabama, who later became the senior sergeant major in the Marine Corps, expressed the feelings of a lot of those first men when he said: "I wanted to be a Marine because I had always heard that the Marine Corps was the toughest outfit going and I felt that I was the toughest going, and so I wanted to be a member of the best organization."¹⁷

Other recruits, faced with a long delay in reporting to boot camp unless they had qualifications that were needed in the initial camp setup, stretched the truth a little. In Boston, a young black, Obie Hall, who eventually became the first man in the first squad in the first regular recruit platoon organized at Montford Point, told the recruiting sergeant that he could drive a truck. He recalled later, "I could no more drive a truck than a man in the moon, [but] I said, 'I'm a truck driver.'"¹⁸ And as a result he arrived at Montford Point on 2 September 1942.

The original schedule called for about 25 cooks, bakers, and barbers to report to camp on 26 August. The next 100 men were to report on 2-3 September and another 125 or so with miscellaneous qualifications were to arrive on 16-17 September. The middle of each month thereafter was to bring about 200 recruits until the target total of 1,200 men was reached.¹⁹

The Camp Opens

On 18 August 1942, Headquarters and Service Battery of the 51st Composite Defense Battalion was activated at Montford Point with Colonel Woods as battalion commander. His executive officer and officer in charge of recruit training was Lieutenant Colonel Theodore A. Holdahl, a World War I enlisted man commissioned as a regular officer in 1924, who had served in the Philippines, China, Nicaragua, and British Guiana.²⁰ Battery strength, all white Marines, was 23 officers and 90 enlisted men, these last soon to be known to black recruits as SES men (Special Enlisted Staff). While there was a sprinkling of experienced officers and warrant officers, the majority of the commissioned strength was second lieutenants not long out of officers' training at



the Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia. The staff NCOs, sergeants, and some of the corporals were men with years of experience in the Marine Corps. The few privates first class (PFCs) and privates filled clerical, motor transport, and other camp support billets.

The men chosen to be drill instructors (DIs) were "old line" Marines, men who were to impress the black recruits with their bearing and firmness of manner. In the memory of one of the few recruits who had had prior experience in the Armed Forces, Gilbert H. Johnson, these DIs "set about from the very beginning to get us thoroughly indoctrinated into the habits and the thinking and the actions of the Marine Corps. Discipline seemed to be their lone stock in trade, and they applied it with a vengeance, very much to our later benefit."²¹

On schedule, 13 of the 24 black recruits expected in August arrived at Montford Point on the 26th. The first black private to set foot in the camp was Howard P. Perry of Charlotte, North Carolina. He was joined on that eventful first day by Jerome D. Alcorn, Willie B. Cameron, Otto Cherry, Lawrence S. Cooper, Harold O. Ector, Eddie Lee, Ulysses J. Lucas, Robert S. Parks, Jr., Edward Polin, Jr., Emerson E. Roberts, Gilbert C. Rousan, and James O. Stallworth. The rest of the 23 men who eventually arrived in August came in over the next five days. Battery A of the 51st Composite Defense Battalion was organized on 26 August "as an administrative and tactical unit for the training of recruit platoons," with Second Lieutenant Anthony Caputo as commanding officer.²²

In September recruit training began in earnest. What Montford Point Marines later called the "Mighty" 1st, 2d, and 3d Recruit Platoons were organized with 40 men in each platoon. Several SES NCOs were assigned to each platoon to give the men experience in handling black recruits; as more men came in in mid-September many of the original DIs were transferred to help form new platoons. This was to be the experience of the first few months, in fact it was not long before exceptional recruits were being singled out and made "Acting Jacks," assistant DIs in their own platoons. This came about partially because of the shortage of white NCOs and equally as well because one purpose of all training at Montford Point was to discover and develop potential black NCOs.

The number of voluntary enlistments of black Marines was not up to the anticipated

rate. The requirement for these first recruits to have ability in needed skills was undoubtedly a factor in the slow intake. It became necessary on 9 October to modify the plans for assembling the black personnel of the 51st, and the assignment of experienced SES personnel had to be curtailed in the face of pressure for men for FMF units already deployed in the Pacific. Although it had been anticipated that 1,200 black recruits would be enlisted by the end of October less than 600 were in camp.²³ The Commandant was writing as late as 19 December that "colored personnel will continue to be procured and ordered to the 51st Composite Defense Battalion at the rate of 200 recruits per month until 1,200 is reached."²⁴

The camp at this time made an indelible impression on the incoming recruits. Coming off Highway 24 near the small and sleepy town of Jacksonville, a narrow road about a mile long led through a corridor of tall pine trees into a large clearing where there was:

. . . 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 compound, a small officers' club, and 120 green prefabricated huts, each designed for billeting 16 men.²⁵

Surrounding the open spaces of the main camp area were thick pine forests. Beyond the north forest area 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. Across the creek was an old Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp area now partially occupied by a war dog training center. In all there was about 5½ square miles of rugged ground in the original camp site. Mosquitoes abounded, the woods were full of snakes, and bears padded about through the camp, much to the consternation of recruits who saw their tracks when they fell out for morning roll call. There was a lot of bush in the camp area to start off with, but the boots soon cleared it away or wore it away with their incessant drilling.

Part and parcel of this somewhat drab and uninviting encampment was the traditional DI reception the incoming recruits received. The idea at all boot camps, whether white at Parris



Montford Point Camp as it appeared in 1943. In the left center is the mess hall; in right center are the "little green huts" of boot camp. (Photo from Montford Point Pictorial).

Island and San Diego or black at Montford Point, was to knock the new recruit off balance, keep him on the run, hammer at him physically and psychologically day and night, and eventually meld him as an individual into a member of a team, his platoon. There was ample room for the men to believe one DI's statement, "I'm going to make you wish you never had joined this damn Marine Corps."²⁶

In point of fact, however, Gilbert Johnson, who had served six years in the Army's black 25th Infantry on the Mexican Border in the 1920s and most of the 1930s as a Navy mess attendant and officers' steward, sagely observed in regard to the white DIs that "the policy was to select the type of individuals who were not against the Negro being a Marine, and had it been otherwise, why I'm afraid that we would have all left the first week. Some of us, probably, the first night."²⁷

Johnson, who had been an Officers' Steward 2d Class, had asked to be discharged from the Navy in order to enlist in the Marine Corps as a private. The Commandant and the Secretary

of the Navy concurred in his request; he received his discharge, enlisted in the Marines, and soon became known, once out of boot camp, as "Hashmark" Johnson, because of the prior service stripes that he wore on his sleeves. Due in part to his age, 37, when he reached Montford Point, his considerable service experience, and a serious dedication to making a success of being a Marine, he was destined to become a legend in his own lifetime to the first black Marines, an elder statesman and historian of the Montford Point experience.

But "Hashmark" Johnson was far from the only memorable man who joined in those first few months when volunteers filled the ranks at Montford Point. The recruiters had been selective; there were other men with Army service, John T. Pridgen, who had been a member of the black 10th Cavalry in the late 1930s, and George A. Jackson, who had been an Army lieutenant. Both eventually became drill instructors. There was a host of college graduates and men who had had college training including Charles F. Anderson, a graduate

of Morehouse College, who arrived in September and eventually became the first black sergeant major of Montford Point Camp and Charles W. Simmons, a graduate of Alcorn A and M with a masters degree from the University of Illinois, who wound up as sergeant major of the 51st Defense Battalion.²⁸ The man who was to become the senior bayonet and unarmed combat instructor of black recruits, Arvin L. "Tony" Ghazlo, a former bodyguard and jujitsu instructor from Philadelphia,²⁹ arrived in October, and the next month saw the man who was to be his principal assistant, Ernest "Judo" Jones, reach Montford Point. Besides teaching the recruits, these two and their

assistants were responsible for many memorable exhibitions of unarmed combat techniques.

There were many of those early recruits who became men of note amongst black Marines and, in fact, men of substance in their communities in later life. They were, in general, a select body of young men; the recruiters had tried hard to find and send to Montford Point men with technical, educational, and work backgrounds who had the potential to fill out the various billets of a defense battalion. The call for such specialists could not be completely met, however, and the Commandant was informed in late October that it was "doubtful if even white recruits could be procured with the



Corporal Alvin "Tony" Ghazlo, senior bayonet and unarmed combat instructor at Montford Point, disarms his assistant, Private Ernest "Judo" Jones. (USMC Photo 5334).

qualifications listed”³⁰ This racial comparison of relative skills was not as odious as it might seem today, but rather a statement of the prevailing situation in most of the country, where the general education level of blacks was lower than that of whites and the chances for skilled job experience were severely limited for blacks.

The First Graduates

By the end of November 1942, the initial recruit platoons were near the finish of their eight weeks of boot camp. Two weeks preliminary marksmanship training was conducted at Montford Point, culminated by a week of live firing at the Camp Lejeune rifle range near Stone Bay. Since there were as yet no living facilities for blacks at the range, the recruits found themselves trucked to the range before dawn and returned to camp after nightfall. Still, they did well, and the majority of the first 198 men to graduate from boot camp qualified as rifle marksmen or sharpshooters, enabling them to wear their qualification badges proudly on their uniforms. Even more important to the men, the first blacks were qualified to sew rank stripes on their uniforms in November. On the 1st, 16 privates were promoted to private first class and on the 19th, four privates were promoted to assistant cook. Many of the new PFCs had been acting as assistant DIs to the SES NCOs, some had even finished up the training of their platoons as the white DIs were spread thin among newly formed units. Others of the new “one stripers” were slated to take over office duties in existing or planned headquarters, while the newly designated cooks would man the kitchens of the 51st’s messhall.

In early December, the new graduates had their first opportunity to go on liberty and poured out the front gate walking down the long road to Jacksonville. Their reception was a rude awakening to the men. The sight of a couple of hundred blacks in Marine green coming into the little town was unnerving to the merchants, and they closed down their stores. Far more disturbing, the bus station and the ticket office were also closed, and the young blacks had seemingly lost their opportunity to leave “J-ville.” They had no intention of staying in town, they wanted to get out, to take a bus to Wilmington, Kinston, or New Bern, larger towns with substantial black popu-

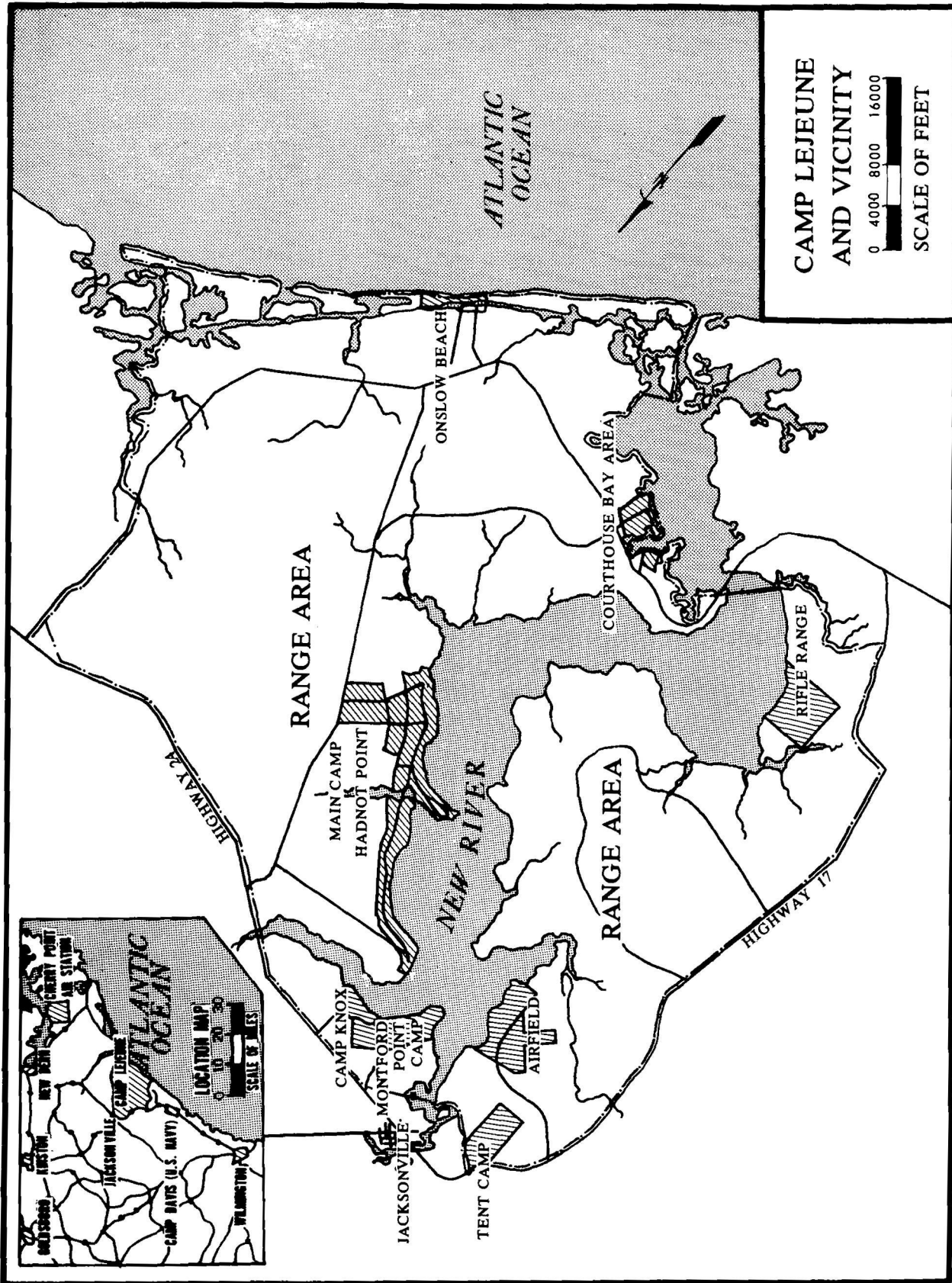
lations. In this instance, as in many, Colonel Woods was the champion of the black Marines. He ordered out the 51st’s trucks, which took the men to their chosen liberty towns, stayed with them, and brought them back to Montford Point. And he took steps to ensure that the buses were available thereafter to the black Marines. Yet, the actualities of segregation in the South made the use of these buses a sore point with the men at Montford Point. Not only did they have to ride in the back of the bus, they were often arbitrarily denied entrance by the white bus drivers while the buses were filled with white Marines returning from liberty. On a few occasions during the course of the war years, white bus drivers who attempted such arbitrary action found themselves abandoned beside the road while a delighted crew of black Marines returned themselves to Montford Point in the commandeered buses.

With the advent of promotions and liberty came new assignments for the first recruit graduates. The 51st Composite Defense Battalion began to take shape. On 1 December, Rifle Company (Reinforced) of the 51st was organized. But its immediate function belied its name, for it was primarily a schools and training organization for the many specialists needed. Student bandsmen, cooks, clerks, communicators, and truck drivers were among the men who filled its ranks. Some of these individuals were already experienced in their specialties, others had been selected to learn by formal schooling or on-the-job training. Also formed on the 1st was a 155mm gun battery and a 90mm antiaircraft group. On 21 December, a 75mm pack howitzer battery was organized. Remaining behind in Battery A were nine privates and 12 PFCs, six of the latter to serve as DIs and six as battery clerks.

December offered many of the newly minted Marines a chance for a week’s furlough; many were home for Christmas or New Year’s Day. Their misadventures were many, for their number was still small, and the existence of black Marines was apparently not widely known. In several instances, men were questioned or arrested for impersonating a Marine, but the misunderstandings were usually cleared up in short order.

Expansion Looms

While the 51st Composite Defense Battalion, still the vehicle for handling all black Marines,



was in the process of reorganization, there was the prospect of a whole new ball game insofar as blacks in the Marine Corps was concerned. Instead of 1,200 men, one defense battalion and its training base, there were going to be thousands more men arriving at Montford Point.

On 5 December 1942, voluntary enlistments in the Armed Forces were discontinued for all men 18 to 37 years of age, although 17 year olds and, in some instances, those 38 or older could still volunteer for the Navy and Marine Corps. Beginning in January 1943, all men in the 18-37 age group would be inducted into the services through the Selective Service System. To make the call-up equitable, at least 10 percent of those selected would be blacks, a proportion approximating the number of blacks in the U.S. population as a whole.

The Army, which was the principal beneficiary of the stopping of the flow of the volunteers into the other services, was interested in having the Marine Corps concentrate on taking black draftees until it had reached the same percentage of blacks in its ranks that the Army already had. This concept was unacceptable to the Corps, since it would have severely disrupted existing training plans for replacements and new combat units, but there was no arguing with the imposition of an induction quota. Its advent was recognized early in the year's planning and was confirmed in a memorandum of 8 March 1943 from Headquarters Marine Corps to the Chief of Naval Personnel. Since the approved increase between 1 February and 31 December 1943 was 99,000 men, this placed a requirement on the Corps for the acquisition and accommodation of 9,900 blacks. In order to meet this goal, calls were placed with Selective Service for 400 men in February and March, 800 in April, 1,300 in May, and 1,000 men per month thereafter. Any increase in the authorized strength of the Marine Corps would lead to a corresponding increase in the monthly draft calls for black Marines.³¹

Obviously, Montford Point was due for drastic expansion, and the 51st Composite Defense Battalion could not be the vehicle to absorb such numbers. Some of the new men would have the opportunity of becoming officers' stewards, cooks, and messmen, for the Secretary of the Navy on 1 January had authorized the formation of a Messman Branch (eventually Stewards' Branch) in the Marine Corps,

composed entirely of black Marines. Still others of the incoming thousands would serve in a second defense battalion that was contemplated as a follow on to the 51st. But most of the new recruits, in fact the majority of World War II black Marines, would end up serving in pioneer or labor units, for the need for logistic support troops in the Pacific fighting was acute.

Colonel Woods visited Headquarters Marine Corps in January and presented a plan for the future development of Montford Point. He indicated the 51st could carry on the handling of all black Marines through February and into March when a new 1,000-man camp area would be ready. Simultaneously, organization work would be underway on the Mess Attendants School (an 8-week course) and an Officers' Cooks and Stewards School (a 16-week course). The contemplated increase in black Marines would dictate the organization of a separate Montford Point Camp headquarters by late spring.³²

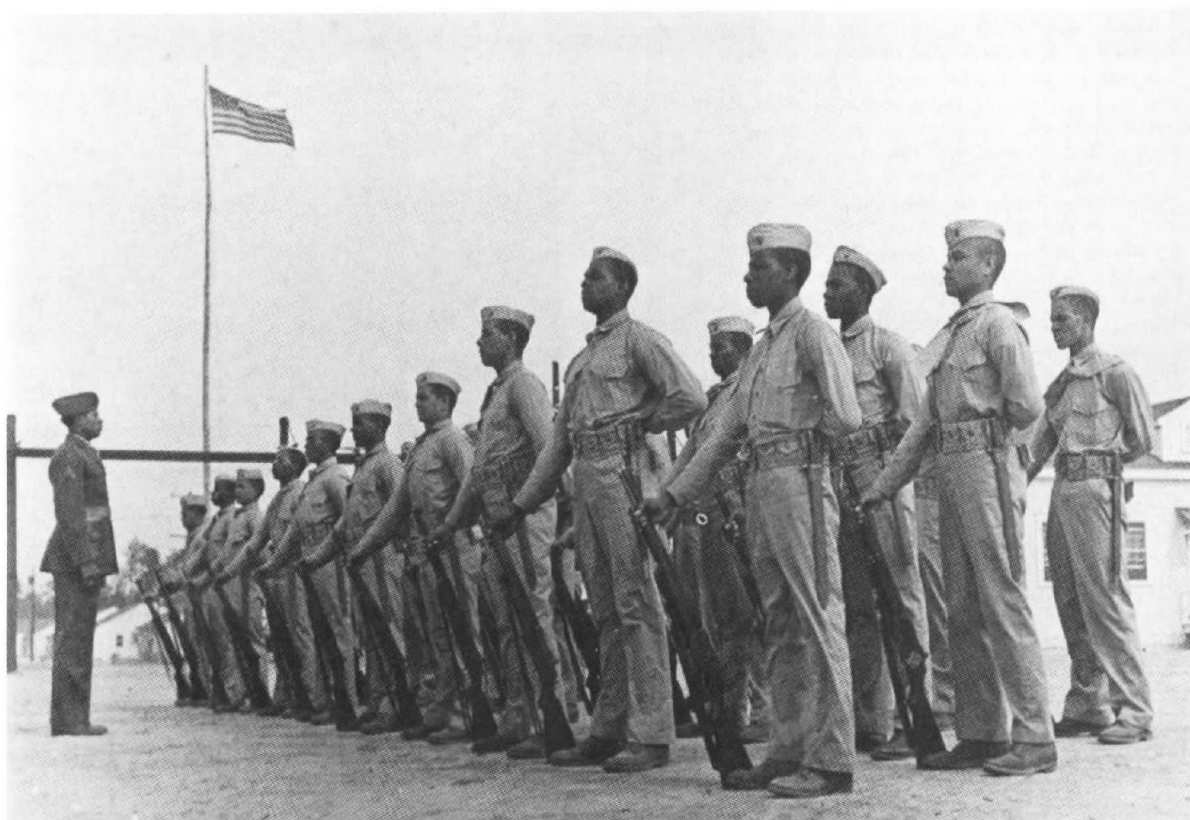
In January, the first 42 selective service men arrived at Montford Point to be treated no differently as boots than the men who had gone before them. Many of the draftees, both then and later, were selective service volunteers. Marine liaison officers with the Selective Service System and Marine recruiters worked mightily to ensure that most of the draftees were men who wanted to serve in the Corps. The experiences of a number of men who entered during this period bear out the continued effort at enlisting the best men available.³³ In May, Colonel Woods wrote the Commandant that "the standard of inductees continues to be about the same as in the case of volunteers. This indicates excellent work by the recruiting service."³⁴

Change continued at Montford Point during the first half of 1943. In January, the first black NCOs were appointed as three assistant cooks, Jerome D. Alcorn, Otto Cherry, and Robert T. Davis, were named field cooks (corporals) on the 18th. Men who had been assigned to tactical units of the 51st, but who had demonstrated that they were of DI caliber while in boot camp, rejoined Battery A in February. Ten of them made corporal on the 19th, the nucleus for a vastly increased recruit training effort. Nineteen other new corporals were made in other units of the 51st in February and thereafter new NCOs were appointed every month.

On 11 March, Headquarters and Service Company, Headquarters Battalion, Montford Point Camp was activated, as was Headquarters Company, Recruit Depot Battalion. Battery A of the 51st became Company A of the Recruit Depot Battalion. Colonel Woods, as camp commander, relinquished his command of the 51st to Lieutenant Colonel W. Bayard Onley, a Naval Academy graduate (1919) who had recently served as Executive Officer, 23d Marines,³⁵ and Lieutenant Colonel Holdahl took over the new recruit battalion. On 1 April 1943, Headquarters Company, Messman Branch Battalion was organized with the new battalion commander Captain Albert O. Madden, a World War I veteran who had been recommissioned as a food service officer after extensive restaurant experience in the Albany, New York, area.³⁶ The new unit with its attendant schools was redesignated Stewards' Branch Battalion on 13 April. The new camp area which would house the stewards was dubbed "Slotnick's Grove" by the black Marines after a young lieutenant who had been involved in its construction.³⁷

Reorganization and augmentation continued at a frantic pace as hundreds of recruits poured into Montford Point. New recruit companies were organized, a Schools Company and a Motor Transport Company were added to the camp headquarters battalion, the 51st's Rifle Company became the vehicle for organizing and dispatching depot companies (labor troops) to the field, and an Assistant Stewards' School (Company A) and a Stewards' Cook School (Company B) were added to Captain Madden's battalion.

The change on the recruit drill field was the most drastic. Almost all of the SES DIs had left by the end of April; black sergeants and corporals took over as the senior DIs of the eight platoons then in training: the 16th Platoon (Edgar R. Huff); 17th (Thomas Brokaw); 18th (Charles E. Allen); 19th (Gilbert H. Johnson); 20th (Arnold R. Bostic); 21st (Mortimer A. Cox); 22d (Edgar R. Davis, Jr.); and 23d (George A. Jackson).³⁸ In late May, the last white drill instructor, First Sergeant Robert W. Colwell, was transferred, and Sergeant "Hashmark" Johnson took his place as the re-



Corporal Edgar R. Huff, one of the first black drill instructors, confronts a recruit platoon at Montford Point. (USMC Photo 5337).

cruit battalion's field sergeant major, in charge of all drill instructors; Sergeant Thomas Pridgen was his assistant. From then on, all recruit training at Montford Point was conducted by black NCOs—a milestone had been passed.

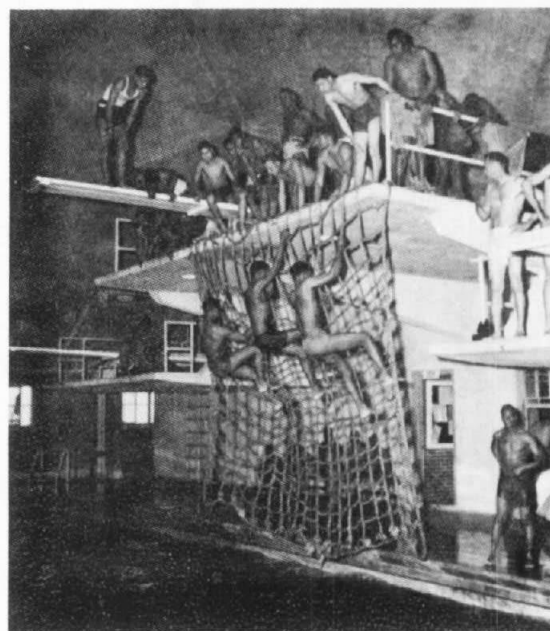
Boot camp did not get any easier, in fact, in the testimony of those who served there in the transition period it became rougher and stayed rougher.³⁹ The boots started on the run and stayed on the run. As one black DI commented: "Glenn Cunningham [a famous miler] had nothing on the recruits at Montford Point."⁴⁰ "Hashmark" Johnson, first as field sergeant major and later as sergeant major of the Recruit Depot Battalion, was determined that the black boots would measure up in every way to Marine Corps standards. His philosophy prevailed boot training. In later years, addressing a group of veterans of that era, he reminded them of their ordeal and the reason for it, remarking:

I was an ogre to some of you that met me on the drill field and in the huts of Montford more than a quarter century ago. I was a stern instructor, but I was fair. I was an exacting instructor, but with some understanding of the many problems involved. I kept before me, always, that nearly impossible goal to qualify in a few weeks, and at the most a few months, a type of Marine fully qualified in every respect to wear that much cherished Globe and Anchor. You were untried. The objectives were to qualify you with loyalty, with a devotion to duty, and with a determination equal to all, transcended by none . . . As I look into your faces tonight, I remember the youthful, and sometimes pained expressions at something I may have said . . . But I remember something you did. You measured up, by a slim margin perhaps, but measure up you did. You achieved your goal. That realization creates within me a warm appreciation of you and a deep sense of personal gratitude.⁴¹

With Johnson's type of drive permeating the boot camp at the man-to-man level of DI and recruit, life proved to be very trying for the new Marines. But it was not all drill and training. There were USO shows and movies at the camp theatre and a full schedule of intramural sports between various units at the camp. And there was always music, for many talented singers and musicians had enlisted. Men from the bands of Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, and Erskine Hawkins were in the ranks of the 51st's band, which later became the camp band. The band was capable of producing jazz combos, dance orchestras, and concert groups of professional caliber.

Fortunately, one of the young officers who arrived early at Montford Point was Lieutenant Robert W. Troup, Jr., an accomplished composer and musician from New York, who established immediate rapport with the black musicians which carried over to the rest of the men. He eventually became camp recreation officer, and many of his activities were directly connected with the improvement of morale through the arrangement of talent shows, sporting events, and concerts using the multitude of entertainment and athletic talent in the ranks at Montford Point. He elicited almost universal praise for understanding, ranging from "Hashmark" Johnson's typically restrained, "a top-notch musician, a very decent sort of officer," to Obie Hall's, "he was the sharpest cat I ever seen in my life."⁴² But most of the men of Montford Point remember Bobby Troup's song "Jacksonville," which hardly rivaled his World War II hit "Route 66" in nationwide popular music charts, but certainly was a hit at Camp Lejeune where it echoed the sentiments of black and white Marines alike with words like:

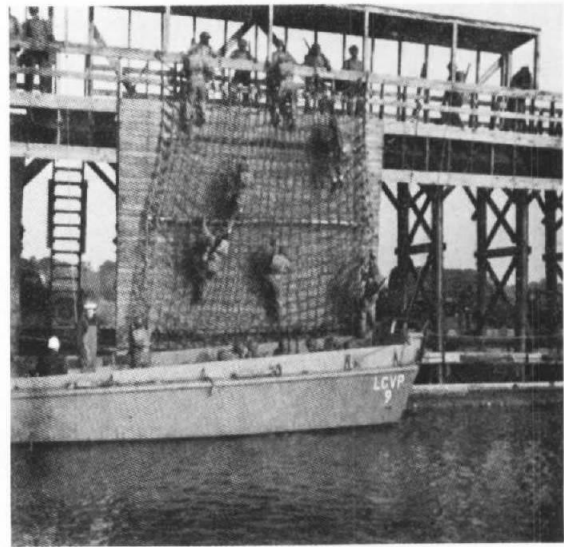
Take me away from Jacksonville, 'cause I've had my fill and that's no lie,
Take me away from Jacksonville, keep me away from Jacksonville until I die,
Jacksonville stood still while the rest of the world passed by.⁴³



Black Marines practice descending cargo nets in Montford Point's training pool under the watchful eye of Sergeant Paul E. Meeres (on board). (USMC Photo 8275).

Near mid-summer, one of the frequent entertainments that featured Montford Point talent, a series of boxing matches plus unarmed combat exhibitions by Tony Ghazlo and his instructors, produced an incident that has never left the memory of any man who witnessed it. Major General Henry L. Larsen, who had just returned from the South Pacific to take command of Camp Lejeune, was invited to attend this "boxing smoker" and took the occasion to make a short speech to the assembled black Marines. There are as many versions of his exact words as there are witnesses, but the gist of his remarks, as remembered, was that when he had come back from overseas he had not realized how serious the war situation was until he had seen "you people wearing our uniform."⁴⁴ The unfriendly response from the predominantly black audience was immediate and tumultuous. His unfortunate choice of words emphasized to the men that they were still on trial in the eyes of many white Marines.

By early fall, when Bobby Troup's popular farewell to Jacksonville was being sung, whistled, and played throughout Montford Point, many men had already left the North Carolina camp. When the anniversary date of the opening of Montford Point was reached, four depot companies had already deployed overseas, and a Marine barracks detachment had been sent to the Naval Ammunition Depot, McAlester, Oklahoma. The 51st had locked on to a train-



Marines from Montford Point climb down a cargo net into a waiting LCV(P) for a practice landing at Onslow Beach. (USMC Photo 9007).

ing schedule for overseas deployment, other depot companies were forming for duty in the Pacific, and stewards were leaving for assignment to officers' messes in the states and overseas. The pace of the camp quickened as more and more men left for duty beyond the reaches of Montford Point. The test of combat was yet to come for black Marine units, but it was inevitable.

CHAPTER 2

THE 51ST DEFENSE BATTALION

Throughout the first six months that blacks served in the Marine Corps, the focus of attention was the 51st Composite Defense Battalion. It was to be the first (and for a time, the only) black combat unit. Its initial stages of training were hampered by equipment shortages, but even more by the complete unfamiliarity of the men with the weapons and supporting equipment they encountered. There were a number of qualified white instructors for the various specialties, and many of the junior officers had attended short technical courses of various types, but the biggest drawback to the battalion's progress in training was the fact that it had no cadre of experienced men on which to build.

The initial selection of men the battalion received in its new tactical units was a good one, but many of these served only briefly in its ranks before they moved on to the drill field, to schools, and to camp offices to help cope with the swelling tide of draftees, or to the depot companies that began forming in March and April. As a consequence, there were only about 500 men on the rolls of the 51st on 21 April 1943 when a new commanding officer fresh from overseas, Lieutenant Colonel Floyd A. Stephenson, arrived at Montford Point to take over. His predecessor, Lieutenant Colonel Onley, moved on to take command of the camp Headquarters Battalion and to serve as Colonel Wood's executive officer.

Lieutenant Colonel Stephenson was an experienced artillery officer who had been at Pearl Harbor with the 4th Defense Battalion when the Japanese attacked. Later, he served as the battalion's executive officer and commander of its 5-inch artillery group at Efate in the New Hebrides.¹ He approached his new task with enthusiasm and considerable drive. Within two weeks, he was recommending that the 51st become a regular, heavy defense battalion and stating "that there is nothing that suitable colored personnel can not be taught."² Colonel Woods in his favorable en-

dorsement to Stephenson's recommendation indicated that he was "now fully convinced that this unit can be forged into a first class fighting outfit in a reasonably short time after its complement is filled." He also noted that a composite defense battalion was designed "to meet the requirements of a situation that no longer exists."³

The units that would be detached from the 51st, if the change took place, would be the Rifle Company (Reinforced) and the 75mm Pack Howitzer Battery. A Machine Gun Group had been organized on 1 March 1943 to give the battalion a light antiaircraft capability and it would remain together with the 155mm and 90mm guns.

The recommendation was approved at Headquarters Marine Corps on 28 May 1943



90mm anti-aircraft gun crew of the 51st Defense Battalion practices loading shells at Montford Point. (USMC Photo 9507).

with the stipulation that men under training for infantry and field artillery would continue to train with the 51st pending organization of a separate infantry battalion.⁴ The news of the change caused some bewilderment and consternation among the black Marines at Montford Point. The inclusion of infantry and field artillery in the 51st had meant to most men that the battalion would see some close combat. The purpose of separating and redesignating these units was widely misunderstood. Reinforcing this misunderstanding was the loss, earlier in the year, of the light tank platoon which had been part of the rifle company. Although some defense battalions already overseas had such platoons, they were no longer to be an integral part of the defense battalion organization. Rumor had it that the black Marines would serve only as labor troops or officers' stewards.

The First Combat Unit

Fortunately, the rumor was soon dispelled insofar as the 51st was concerned. On 7 June 1943, "Composite" was dropped from the title of the 51st Defense Battalion. The 155mm Gun Battery expanded to become the 155mm Artillery Group and the Machine Gun Group became the Special Weapons Group, its principal armament now being 20mm and 40mm cannon as well as .50 caliber machine guns. Rifle Company (Reinforced) was redesignated Company A, 7th Separate Infantry Battalion and the 75s became the 7th Separate Pack Howitzer Battery. Both units were attached to the camp's Headquarters Battalion but were stationed in the 51st's area to continue training with the defense battalion.

The redesignations continued in July when the 155s became the Seacoast Artillery Group and the 90s the Antiaircraft Artillery Group, in keeping with the titles of such units in a new table of organization for defense battalions.⁵ The summer was fully occupied with intensive training on weapons, fire control equipment, searchlights, and all the myriad of equipment that a defense battalion possessed. A few men were sent away to specialist schools at various Army bases and some received schooling at Camp Lejeune, but the vast majority learned on the job. The battalion doubled in size in July, and the growth continued in succeeding months, with over 1,700 officers and men on

the rolls in October. Not all these Marines were destined to serve in the 51st, however.

Lieutenant Colonel Stephenson had been given the task of assimilating and training the cadre of another defense battalion, approximately 400 men, at the same time he readied his own troops for combat. The new unit, the 52d Defense Battalion, was to be organized at the start of 1944.⁶

The increased pace of training was marred by the death on 20 August of the first black to die in Marine Corps uniform, Corporal Gilbert Fraser, Jr. of the 51st's Seacoast Artillery Group. Fraser, a New Yorker who had attended Virginia Union College, was killed when he fell 30 feet from a landing net into a landing boat while his unit was practicing debarkation. A road leading from the main camp at Montford Point to the base artillery area was named after the popular 30-year-old Marine. Lieutenant Colonel Stephenson noted Fraser Road would be "a constant reminder to those who come after him of the fine type of young manhood" represented by Gilbert Fraser.⁷

In early September, the battalion moved out of Montford Point proper across Scales Creek to the old CCC-Camp Knox area where it took over three of four barracks blocks; the other was occupied by the War Dog Training Center. The accommodations in the new campsite were not luxurious; the barracks, mess halls, and offices were old wooden buildings, drafty and badly in need of repair.⁸ The living quarters were characterized by one of the 51st as "more open than closed" and dominated by big pot-bellied stoves. He recalled that if you stood within 10 feet of them "you roasted in front and froze behind."⁹ But the move was popular with the battalion. It was off by itself, running its own show, and the transfer across Scales Creek intensified the feeling of the men of the 51st that they were a bit different, superior even, to the rest of the blacks at Montford Point. In the battalion's news column in the Camp Lejeune paper, the writer, Sergeant Jimmie Stewart, observed: "We just can't get over the thrill of being here at Camp Knox. Boy, its really swell. Makes us feel like we're in the groove again and that life is not so bad after all."¹⁰

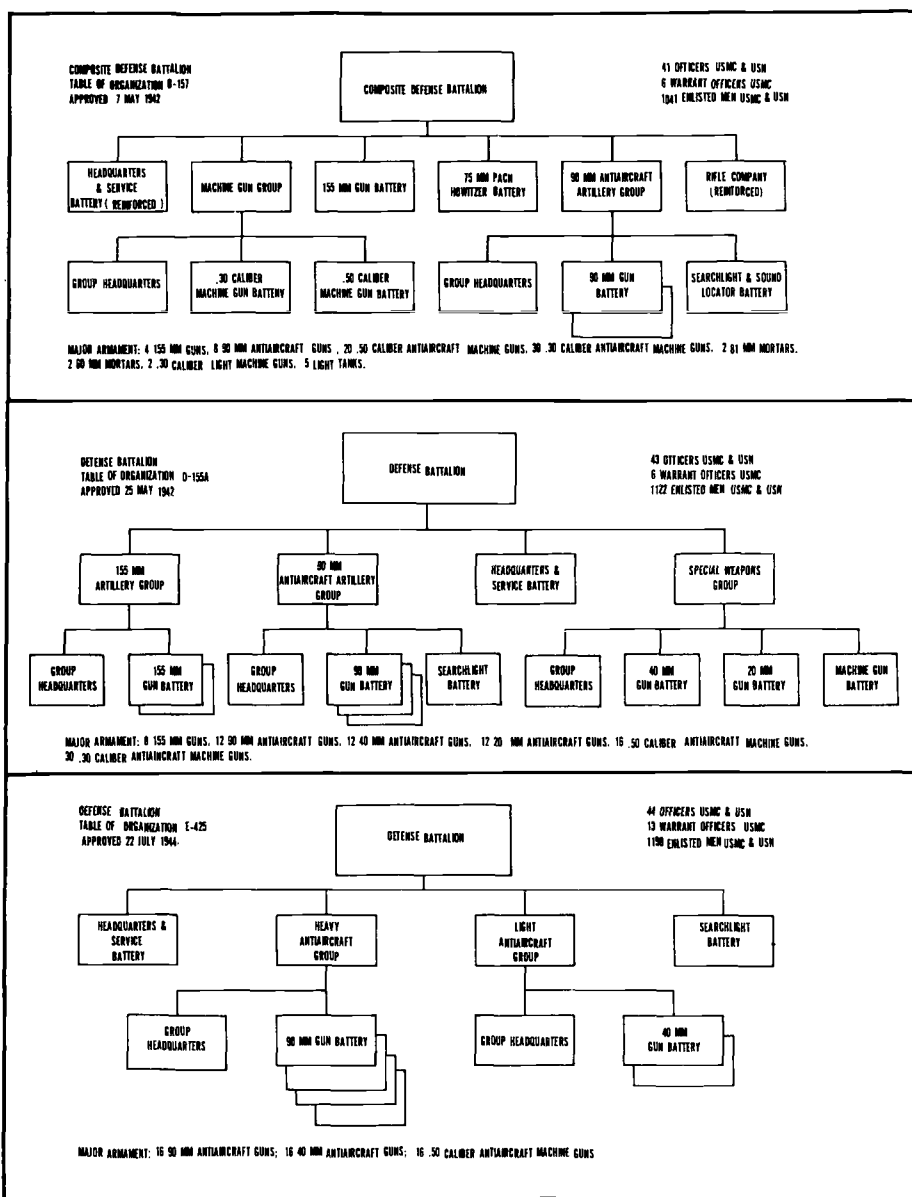
Most of the reason the men of the 51st "thought they were the cat's meow," as one member put it, was that they were in the only black Marine unit engaged in extensive combat training.¹¹ They considered themselves to be

members of a fighting outfit and were not at all hesitant about reminding the other black Marines of the fact. On liberty they stuck together, a not unusual trait of men from units with high morale. They were convinced, and not without some reason, that most of the men at Montford Point wanted to serve in the 51st.

The battalion's lot throughout the fall of 1943 was hard, exhausting training. First the Seacoast Group moved out to Onslow Beach to fire its 155s; the Antiaircraft and Special Weapons Groups soon followed to test their gunnery. The whole battalion spent two

months in the field, a period that saw hard usage for all its equipment in frequently miserable weather. In order to fill the ranks of the augmented 51st, many men with no recruit training and others with only a few days of boot camp were added to the firing batteries so that they could get target practice experience, and the battalion would be ready to mount out at full strength on schedule.¹² It made the task of the officers and white instructor NCOs doubly difficult to have to supervise these raw recruits and train the "veterans," who were not long out of boot camp themselves. Still, the job

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was done, although a number of the officers noted in their December training reports and in later comments that they thought the 51st needed more training before going overseas, that the newly promoted black NCOs needed more seasoning, and that in general the men, most of whom had had no experience with sophisticated equipment, "showed a lack of appreciation of the value or importance of material and equipment."¹³

These judgments did not obviate the fact that men had often done quite well at target practice at Onslow Beach. When an inspecting party including Secretary Knox and General Holcomb watched the 90mm guns being fired in November, the gun crews shot down the towed target within 60 seconds after they started firing. Lieutenant Colonel Stephenson reported General Holcomb as remarking, "I think they're ready now."¹⁴ And "What a yelp went up" amongst the black Marines when they hit that target; to them it proved too that they were ready.¹⁵

Not long after the battalion returned to Camp Knox in early December, Lieutenant Colonel Stephenson went to Headquarters Marine Corps to get further orders on the future of the 51st. Much to his dismay he found that the battalion's sailing orders had been moved up five weeks from original plans and that the 52d Defense Battalion was also to be organized two weeks ahead of the original projection. Plans for sending the men who had joined as recruits to the rifle range to complete that essential part of their training had to be scrapped and holiday leaves cancelled. The 400-odd men destined for the 52d were transferred out of the 51st and the new battalion was formed on 15 December. Plans for special training of the seacoast artillery in field artillery firing techniques were put aside and all officers and men away at school were recalled. All hands turned to at a furious pace to crate and pack the battalion's equipment for the pending move.¹⁶

Another sure sight that the battalion was on its way was the transfer of the white senior NCOs and instructors to other units at Camp Lejeune. The blacks who had been their assistants now took over. Gunnery Sergeant Charles W. Simmons became the battalion sergeant major. He later recalled: "I will never forget the consternation of the white sergeant who trained me for the job of Sergeant Major of the 51st, when we learned that he would not

go overseas with the battalion. I was surprised too—but I understand the situation. I had graduated!"¹⁷

In early January, 175 freight cars were loaded at the rate of 25 a day, mostly in rotten weather with heavy doses of rain, snow, and sleet.¹⁸ The men turned to with a will, however, since they were sure they were headed for combat. The battalion moved out in increments with the seacoast artillery leading off and the rest of the units followed in their own troop trains. By 19 January, only a relatively small rear echelon was left at Camp Knox, and it too was slated to leave the next day.

The departure of the 51st was not without incident that became a matter of controversy and investigation. What started out to be some farewell rounds of beer by rear echelon members at the Montford Point snack bar deteriorated into a conflict with the military police. When the confrontation reached the bottle-throwing stage, the MP sergeant on the scene closed the snack bar. As some of the 51st's men started to throw rocks at him, he fired his carbine in the air three times in warning, and the crowd dispersed.

Later that evening, about 15 or 20 shots were fired from the Camp Knox area towards Montford Point. Unfortunately, one of these random shots, which were judged to be firings with no intent to hit anyone, did find a target. Corporal Rolland J. Curtiss, a drill instructor who had his platoon in the woods back of the camp theatre, was wounded, though not seriously.

Authorities soon made checks of all the rifles in the Camp Knox area but could not determine conclusively if any had been fired. There was evidence, however, of some laxity in the accountability of rifles in the battalion. This became a feature of a critical report that Colonel Woods submitted to the Commandant after the departure of the last elements of the 51st for the west coast. He commented unfavorably on the police of certain parts of the camp, that numerous items of personal equipment had been left behind, and that the care of government property had been neglected.¹⁹

So it happened that the 51st Defense Battalion arrived at San Diego under somewhat of a cloud. Most of the men in the battalion were unaware of the events that had transpired. They were proudly wearing their new battalion shoulder patch, issued just before they left



Religious services are held at Onslow Beach for men of the 51st's Seacoast Artillery Group. In the background is one of the group's 155mm guns. (Photo from Montford Point Pictorial).

Camp Lejeune.²⁰ It was a red oval with a large white "51" in the center with the white letters "USMC" below and a blue 90mm anti-aircraft gun superimposed on the numerals. As they moved into tents at Camp Elliott, some of the men went to the base's open air movie and disrupted the show when they were told blacks had to sit in the back of the amphitheatre. They were not having any part of segregation that night; they were too full of themselves as combat-bound Marines. Despite the fracas, Lieutenant Colonel Stephenson authorized the issuance of liberty passes.²¹

On 27 January 1944, much to the disappointment of the men, who liked and respected Stephenson, the battalion was assigned a new commanding officer, and Stephenson was transferred. Colonel Curtis W. LeGette, the new commander, was a veteran artillery officer who had originally entered the Marine Corps as an enlisted man in 1910. He had just returned to the states from a tour of duty as commanding officer of the 7th Defense Battalion in the Ellice Islands.²² Soon after he took over, he fell the battalion in and gave the men a dressing down on the subject of their discipline and general behavior. Naturally enough, he used the term "you people," a common expression in the Marine Corps by a superior when addressing a group of men, but to the men of

the 51st it meant "you blacks" and the lecture fell on deaf ears.²³

Overseas Duty

Much to the young blacks surprise, all of the weapons and equipment that they had packed so laboriously on the east coast were now turned in to the quartermasters at Camp Elliott and San Diego. The men retained only their personal gear and the battalion only a modest amount of its property. On 11 February, the 51st boarded a merchant transport, SS *Meteor*, at San Diego and sailed. The ship's destination was the Ellice Islands, where the 51st was destined to relieve the 7th Defense Battalion. En route to the islands, on 23 February, Detachment A, 51st Defense Battalion was organized with approximately half the men in the battalion on its rolls and Lieutenant Colonel Gould P. Groves, the battalion executive officer, as its commander. The mission of the new detachment was to provide a garrison for Nanomea Island. The rest of the battalion under Colonel LeGette was headed for Funafuti and would outpost Nukufetau.

Moving by landing ship and submarine chaser, Detachment A reached Nanomea on 25 February 1944; the rest of the battalion disembarked at Funafuti on the 27th.²⁴ In both

places the men of the 51st found the Marines of the 7th Defense Battalion eager to leave. "They were never so glad to see black people in their lives," one of the new arrivals at Nanomea decided.²⁵ The 51st took over the equipment and weapons of the 7th Defense, much of which had seen hard usage since the battalion had first reached the South Pacific nine months before Pearl Harbor was attacked.

The task assigned the detachment on Nanomea and the outpost on Nukefetau was to maintain and defend the airfields on those islands for emergency use. On Funafuti, Colonel LeGette was charged with maintaining existing staging and limited repair facilities for aircraft, an anchorage and a motor torpedo boat base, and with defending the atoll. The airfields in the Ellice Islands were on standby to support combat operations then going on in the Marshall Islands to the northward.

Not much exciting happened to the 51st in its first overseas assignment, although the 155mm gun crews on Nanomea did let loose 11 rounds at a suspected enemy submarine on 28 March. Most of the time was spent on gun drill and firing practice, and the battalion began to shake down into a settled outfit, though it still did not entirely please its more senior officers, many of whom were veterans of oversea service with other defense battalions in the early part of the war.

In June, when a letter from the Commandant arrived at Funafuti indicating that the 51st's ordnance and motor transport equipment left behind in California showed signs of lack of proper preventive maintenance, Col-



40mm gun crew of the 51st Defense Battalion ready to fire target practice at Montford Point. (Photo from Montford Point Pictorial).

onel LeGette ordered a board of investigation and appointed himself the examining officer.²⁶ The lengthy study, which included testimony from battery and group commanders, arrived at a conclusion that the former commanding officer of the battalion was primarily at fault.²⁷ When Colonel LeGette followed up this investigation report with an unfavorable report the next month on the state of the 51st's combat efficiency, Lieutenant Colonel Stephenson was embarked on a long siege of letter writing to Washington to tell his side of the story. Much of the correspondence forms the basis for what is known about the state of the 51st's training and capabilities, at least from the standpoint of the battalion's officers. Throughout his embattled responses, Stephenson, who was overseas with the 6th Marine Division at the time, maintained a strong defense of his actions and of the unit he had trained, calling it "the finest organization in the whole Negro program in the Marine Corps. . . ." ²⁸ It should be noted that much of this exchange went on without the knowledge of the men in the ranks of the 51st Defense Battalion. In their own eyes, they had done well and were steadily improving their capabilities.

Another of the frequent changes in the battalion's organization occurred in July. As a result of a Marine Corps-wide reshuffling of tables of organization for defense battalions, most units were redesignated as antiaircraft artillery battalions. Their seacoast artillery groups were disbanded or reorganized into field artillery battalions of the corps artillery of the two Marine amphibious corps in the Pacific. The 51st Defense Battalion, the 52d, and the 6th on Midway were the only units to retain their original titles, although the primary function of all three battalions was now antiaircraft defense.²⁹ On 15 July 1944, the Seacoast Artillery Group of the 51st was disbanded and its men transferred to other units of the battalion. The 90s became a Heavy Antiaircraft Group, Special Weapons became a Light Antiaircraft Group, and a separate Searchlight Battery was organized.

At about the same time these changes were occurring, the 51st's detachments on Nanomea and Nukufetau began moving to Funafuti. Detachment A was disbanded on 15 July, and the battalion began preparations to move to a more forward area. While these activities were going on, the Commandant, Samoan Defense Group, Captain Allen Hobbs, USN, who was

LeGette's senior, wrote the colonel to express "his appreciation for the excellent spirit and efficient manner in which the officers and men of this battalion have carried out their duties under trying and difficult conditions." He further wished the 51st "luck and profitable hunting in your new assignment."³⁰

On to the Marshalls

Once again the weapons and equipment of the 51st had been using were packed and turned in. In the opinion of one member of the motor transport section, which had had to rebuild many of vehicles it had inherited from the 7th Defense Battalion, "everything was standing tall when we left."³¹ The unit went on board ship, the Dutch-manned U.S. Army transport *Kota Agoeng*,³² early in September, sailing on the 8th. The new destination was Eniwetok Atoll, a bustling support area for the operations just concluded in the Mariana Islands.

On 14 September, the battalion arrived at Eniwetok and in the next three days replaced elements of the 10th Antiaircraft Battalion, taking over its weapons and equipment on Eniwetok, Engebi, Parry, and Porky Islands. The 10th was formally relieved on 17 September and left for Pearl Harbor on the *Kota Agoeng*.³³ The 51st, almost as soon as it was settled in position, embarked on an intensive schedule of training and towed-sleeve firing. The radar and searchlight units were constantly busy as aircraft based on the atoll were used to try to penetrate the battalion's defensive screen. There were Japanese on bypassed islands in the Marshalls, and the men were readily aware that they were a lot closer to the shooting war. The enormous lagoon at Eniwetok was a constantly shifting scene as ships passed through going and coming from the forward areas. Here, at least, there was the possibility of action and spirits perked up.

The men of the 51st really sharpened their talents as gunners at Eniwetok. The battalion became a veteran unit; towed-sleeve targets were shot down with regularity, searchlights pinpointed their targets as soon as they "struck arc," and the radar operators prided themselves in detecting any and all snoopers.³⁴ But the fact of the matter remained that the first black Marine combat unit was not in combat.

On 13 December 1944, Colonel LeGette relinquished command of the 51st to return to

the States. When he left he expressed regret that he could not stay with the battalion throughout its overseas tour.³⁵ The new and last commander of the 51st was its former executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Groves, who had joined it at Montford Point in 1943.

There was action for the battalion at Eniwetok, but nothing of substance. In early February there was a week-long submarine alert with many contacts but no sightings. Later in the spring, Condition Red was sounded, and the men raced gleefully and hopefully to their positions, but no enemy planes appeared. Their disappointment was bitter. No matter how well trained the battalion became, there was bound to be a letdown in morale. One former sergeant recalled, "the routine got so boresome, but we got a few plane crashes, a couple once in a while; a ship would go down at sea trying to land, but other than that they were disappointed they didn't actually get into combat. That was what they really wanted."³⁶

On 12 June 1945, a detachment of one 90mm gun battery, one 40mm platoon, and four searchlight sections was formed at Eniwetok for duty at Kwajalein Atoll. Christened Composite Group, 51st Defense Battalion under Major William M. Tracy, the 251-man unit left Eniwetok by LST on the 14th and disembarked at Kwajalein on 17 June; the rear echelon arrived on the 22d. There the group's duties were the same of those of the remainder of the battalion, antiaircraft defense of an atoll. And like the rest of the 51st, the Composite Group saw no combat action in the war.

Home Again

Once the fighting was over, the Marines in the 51st Defense Battalion were itching to get home. Since the unit had been overseas for 19 months when the war ended and had received no replacements, many of the men were close to the point discharge total projected for the end of the year. The 51st was ripe for return to the States as a unit. The men had started out together, gone through the war together, and now they would go home together.

On 20 November at Kwajalein and 21 November at Eniwetok, detachments of the 52d Defense Battalion arrived from Guam to replace the 51st. The reunion of the two black units was fleeting for the men returning home immediately boarded the ships that had brought the 52d. On 21 November, the Com-



A veteran 90mm crew of the 51st Defense Battalion poses with its gun, "Lena Horne," at Eniwetok in 1945. (USMC Photo 121743).

posite Group sailed on the attack cargo ship USS *Wyandot* (AKA—92) for Pearl Harbor, where the ship stayed a few days before it steamed on for the Panama Canal and the east coast. On Thanksgiving Day, 22 November, the main body of the 51st left Eniwetok without regret and headed for San Diego on another cargo ship, the USS *Sibik* (AK—121). Save for the rough thumping that catching the tail end of a severe storm in an empty ship can give you, the trip back was uneventful.

On 10 December, the *Sibik* docked at San Diego, and the battalion moved to Camp Pendleton, where those men who lived west of the Mississippi and had enough points were discharged. The majority entrained on the 19th and reached Camp Lejeune on Christmas Day 1945, where the men from the Composite Group rejoined. They had returned to Montford Point by way of Norfolk on 21 December.

The processing of the high point men for discharge began almost immediately. The of-

ficers who had long served with the battalion began leaving. After Lieutenant Colonel Groves departed on 7 January, the acting commanding officer for the rest of the month was a second lieutenant. But there was not much of an outfit left for him to command as the discharges continued. On 31 January 1946, the 51st Defense Battalion was formally disbanded and the remaining low point men were transferred to other units at Montford Point.

As the men went their separate ways, they took with them the knowledge that they had served in a unique, a pioneering unit, and had shared its ups and downs. Possessed of an almost cocky belief in themselves as Marines and a special pride in their battalion besides, they had not needed combat to develop self respect. As a black correspondent who visited the 51st at Eniwetok in October 1945 noted about its men: "They are a grand bunch! And because of their ability to come through the kind of experience they have had, with its attendant racial irritants, they undoubtedly will be better men and better citizens."³⁷