

CHAPTER 5

BETWEEN THE WARS

Before the troop reductions and unit disbandments occurred overseas at the end of World War II, Montford Point Camp itself had some changes after the majority of black Marines had been dispatched to field duties. In October 1944 three of the then seven training companies of the Recruit Depot Battalion were disbanded and the Stewards' Branch Battalion was reduced to company strength. By that time there were 15,131 blacks in the Corps out of a total strength of approximately 475,000 men and women. Obviously, the black figure did not represent the 10 percent of Marine Corps strength that was contemplated in 1943, but the corps was never able to fill its black selective service quotas. In fact, only about 65 percent of the men called for induction were taken.¹

In contrast, however, and encouragingly, 1944 saw the first signs that the Marine Corps would eventually have black officers. That summer the first black Marines were assigned to the Navy's V-12 program, which was designed to provide qualified enlisted men with a college education at selected colleges and universities and ultimately with a commission in the Navy or Marine Corps Reserve. Only a few months before, in April, Headquarters Marine Corps had made a study that recommended that no black Marine officers be procured at that time, but the study group recognized that such procurement might be ordered by higher authority, which led to recommendations, among others, that black officers be assigned to Montford Point only and that they not be assigned to command over white officers or enlisted men.²

This study was overtaken by events and the inevitability of the advent of black officers was recognized at Headquarters Marine Corps. Preparations were made to send two black college graduates, Charles F. Anderson, sergeant major of Montford Point Camp, and Charles W. Simmons, former sergeant major of the 51st Defense Battalion, to Quantico to the 9th

Platoon Commanders Class.³ To this original duo, one more college graduate was added, First Sergeant George F. Ellis, Jr., who had served overseas with the 26th Marine Depot Company. A rousing send-off party was held at the Staff NCO Club at Montford Point on 12 March 1945 to speed the officer candidates on their way to Quantico.⁴ The letdown was tremendous when all three men failed to make the grade and receive their commissions; one was given a medical discharge for a congenital heart murmur, the other two failed to maintain the required military and scholastic rating, becoming a part of the 13 percent of the class that was not commissioned.⁵ The bad news did not sit well with black Marines, and, as the new



First black Marine officer, Frederick C. Branch, has his second lieutenant's bars pinned on by his wife on 10 November 1945. (USMC Photo 500043).

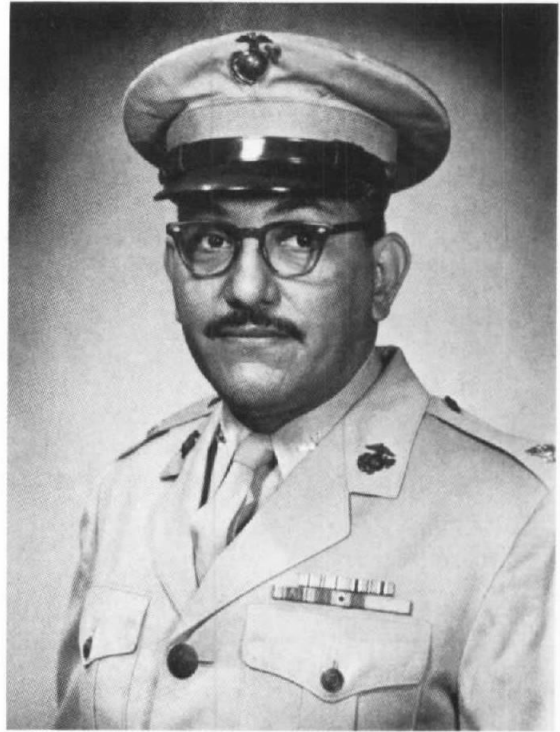
sergeant major at Montford Point, Gilbert "Hashmark" Johnson, put it: "There were a number of questions asked and quite a bit of consternation."⁶

The questions were not without foundation, for the three men were among the best educated and militarily successful black Marines. Later in civilian life they became a lawyer (Anderson), a physician (Ellis), and a college professor and author (Simmons). They were followed in officers training by three similarly qualified black candidates who also failed to make the grade.⁷

But the inevitable did happen. Five more black Marines were assigned to the 16th Platoon Commanders Class meeting that summer at Quantico. This class was in training on V-J Day, and the members were given the opportunity to be discharged, to revert to regular enlisted status, or to stay on in abbreviated training and go on inactive duty as soon as they were commissioned. Of the five blacks one, PFC Frederick C. Branch, born in Hamlet, N.C. and formerly of the 51st Defense Battalion, elected to stay in the training course. Appropriately, on the Marine Corps birthday, 10 November 1945, Second Lieutenant Branch was commissioned as a reserve officer, the first black man to achieve this distinction. Although he immediately went on inactive duty, Branch stayed active in the reserve, commanding a black volunteer reserve unit in Philadelphia in 1949, and returned to active service during the Korean War.

In 1946, three black Marines who had been enrolled in the V-12 program were commissioned as reserve officers on inactive status: Charles C. Johnson of Washington, D.C.; Judd B. Davis of Fuquay Springs, North Carolina; and Herbert L. Brewer of San Antonio, Texas. Lieutenant Johnson resigned to accept a commission in the U.S. Public Health Service in November 1947; Lieutenant Davis was recalled to active duty during the Korean War but was found physically disqualified and was honorably discharged for physical reasons in 1952; Lieutenant Brewer served on active duty in the Korean War and in 1973 was a reserve colonel in the Philadelphia area, the highest ranking black officer in the Marine Corps Reserve.

In a sense, with those first commissions the ice had been broken, but the Marine Corps was still segregated when the war emergency ended and was to remain so for another four years. Montford Point Camp was still home base to all black Marines and the focal point of all comings and goings.



Colonel Herbert L. Brewer, originally commissioned in 1948, the highest ranking black officer in the Marine Corps Reserve in 1973. (USMC Photo A619582).

In all, 19,168 blacks had served in the Marine Corps in World War II and 12,738 of these men had served overseas.⁸ The others were part of the training base at Montford Point or had done duty at the Marine Barracks, Naval Ammunition Depot, McAlester, Oklahoma, in depot units attached to the supply activities at Philadelphia and Norfolk, and in stewards' detachments at major posts and stations in the United States.

The rapid demobilization of the Marine Corps in late 1945 and 1946 created a time of considerable upheaval at Montford Point, a condition shared at most Marine Corps bases. The emphasis was on getting the men who were eligible out of service, and the 2d Casual Company at Montford Point, which processed most of the men, was handling an average of well over a thousand men a month in the first six months of 1946, reaching its peaks in February (1,945) and May (1,848). All recruit training of World War II lineage came to an end after 25 January 1946 when the 62 men in the last three recruit platoons, the 573d, 574th, and 575th, fired for record at the range at Stone Bay. The field sergeant major was Gunnery Sergeant Haywood D. Collier and the DIs

of the final platoon, the 575th, were Corporal Charles E. Counts and PFC John A. Peeples, Jr.⁹

By January 1946, most black veterans had some idea of the shape of the postwar Marine Corps insofar as blacks were concerned. Separate and segregated units would continue, probably an antiaircraft battalion, some depot companies, the Stewards' Branch, and a small detachment at Montford Point. The prospect did not seem to have much appeal to the lower ranking black Marines.¹⁰ Although a number of staff NCOs switched to the regular Marine Corps as career men, only a trickle of PFCs, corporals, and sergeants reenlisted. Apparently, in the rush for discharge and the resultant disbandment and consolidation of organized units, there did not appear to be much consistent purpose in what was going on at Montford Point. Topping this for many blacks was the continued segregation in the Corps and the fact that many of them waiting for discharge at Montford Point found themselves being used on work details in other parts of Camp Lejeune, cleaning up barracks and grounds occupied by white Marines. Naturally enough, this did not sit well with the young blacks, who were certain that the reverse situation would not apply.¹¹

Deliberations at Headquarters Marine Corps regarding the postwar status of black Marines in the spring of 1946 were spurred on by Navy Department pronouncements of a policy of non-discrimination by reason of color or race in the naval service. A Bureau of Naval Personnel circular letter of 27 February announced the abolition of all restrictions in the Navy governing types of assignments in all ratings, in all activities, and on all ships. However, there was to be a 10 percent limitation on the number of blacks in any ship or activity.¹² An Army study group's report on postwar plans for black soldiers, issued in March, was more traditional in nature. The group recommended the retention of separate black units no larger than infantry regiments. Units were to be of all types, both combat and service, with a ratio one black to 10 whites throughout the Army.¹³

In the Marine Corps, which was contemplating an overall postwar strength of 100,000, the proportion of blacks was to be much lower than in the other services. There was a much diminished peacetime requirement for the types of units in which blacks had served and

apparently little disposition to create new fields of opportunity. The initial projection of strength was 2,800, the estimated number of billets in the postwar establishment that could be filled by black Marines under a policy of maintaining separate black units and the Stewards' Branch. Of this number 414 would serve at posts and stations in the U.S., 1,847 would be in ground FMF units, and 290 would serve in aviation billets. Non-available men (those sick, confined, absent, or in transit) were estimated at 249.¹⁴

The provision for black Marines to be a part of Marine aviation was an innovation, since none except stewards had served in air units during World War II. The Director of Aviation at Headquarters objected to the proposed assignment, indicating that he had no units which could operate separately and be composed entirely of blacks. Initially, he was overruled by the Director of the Division of Plans and Policies who rightly pointed out that the exclusion of general duty black Marines from aviation was discriminatory.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the Director of Aviation won the argument and blacks, except stewards, were deleted from the aviation troop list by a decision of the Commandant in early June 1946.¹⁶

The memorandum regarding postwar employment of blacks was approved a few days earlier, on 28 May 1946. In it was a paragraph that summed up Headquarters Marine Corps' position on integration:

It appears that the Negro question is a national issue which grows more controversial yet is more evaded as time goes by. During the past war the services were forced to bear the responsibilities of the problem, the solutions of which were often intended more to appease the Negro press and other "interested" agencies than to satisfy their own needs. It is true that a solution to the issue was, and is, to entirely eliminate any racial discriminations within the services, and to remove such practises as separate Negro units, ceilings on the number of Negroes in the respective services, etc., but it certainly appears that until the matter is settled on the higher level, the services are not required to go further than that which is already custom.¹⁷

While there were increasing signs that the complete integration of the services was inevitable, it was readily apparent that the leaders of the Marine Corps were not going to be in the forefront of the integration battle. Their concern was more with how they were going to utilize the black Marines they had and how they were going to recruit enough men to fill the ranks of black units.

Finding a Place

Recruiting for black Marines was suspended in the early months of 1946 until there was a clearer idea of how many veterans might become regulars and what the postwar troop requirements would be. Once the Commandant had approved the concept of employment of black Marines, Montford Point Camp again became the black boot camp. A Training Company was formed on 10 June 1946 in succession to the Recruit Training Battalion, which had been reduced to nominal strength after the last platoon had graduated in January and then been disbanded in May. Lieutenant Colonel John F. Mallard, an artilleryman who had served on Guadalcanal with the 1st Marine Division and then with the 4th Marine Division throughout the rest of the war, took command of the new company.¹⁸ His sergeant major was Gilbert "Hashmark" Johnson, First Sergeant Edgar R. Huff became the field sergeant major, and Gunnery Sergeant Thomas Brokaw was appointed NCO in charge of recruit training. The three senior blacks all had extensive experience in recruit instruction and were determined to maintain the standards of discipline and drill with the new men which had prompted the Commanding General, Camp Lejeune, Major General John Marston, to tell a black USO audience in Jacksonville in February: "Montford Point Marines are the snappiest Marines on the entire Camp Lejeune. The others can't touch them in military discipline."¹⁹

As the first volunteer, Private Charles F. Boddie of Nashville, North Carolina, reported on 14 June, the last vestiges of the original boot camp area of Montford Point were disappearing. The green wooden huts that had been the home of thousands of World War II black Marines were torn down. Even Hut No. 1, which had stood at the intersection of Montford Landing Road and Harlem Drive, the receiving hut where new boots got "the word," disappeared.²⁰ Recruit training was now to be located in the Stewards' Branch camp, which had been built to accommodate a thousand men and now held less than a hundred.

To meet the expected influx of 1,400 volunteers who would be needed to flesh out the black Marine units, men who had been DIs before and some new instructors appeared on the drill field during the summer. The new

recruits began to arrive in sufficient numbers to form four platoons and Montford Point was again ringing to the flashing cadences of the black DIs. Sergeant Major Johnson was none too happy with some of the men who were arriving, many of them enlisted for steward duty only which permitted lower mental test requirements than general duty. He did not think that they measured up to the men who had served in World War II. He commented:

. . . the attrition rate among the recruits who came to Montford Point in 1946 and 1947 was much higher than the attrition rate of those who came in earlier, 1943 and 1944. We would start out with a platoon of 48 and if half that number completed boot camp it was a marvel. The attrition rate was outlandishly high. We seemed to be getting the scrapings of the barrel. None of the old Marines were reenlisting who had been discharged. And the only individuals left seemed to have been the 4Fs who were reclassified and we were getting them.²¹

While the new black Marines were undergoing the rigors of boot camp, there was a concerted effort on the part of Headquarters, Marine Corps to find posts and stations where they could be employed. While the barracks detachment at McAlester, Oklahoma remained a black Marine post, another Marine Barracks on the east coast was wanted. There was more than a little opposition to every posting suggested and even McAlester's days were numbered as a station for the graduates of Montford Point.

Unfortunately, the barracks at McAlester was not an ideal spot for black troops. A letter from the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Clarence J. O'Donnell, of 5 November 1946, outlined some of the problems. The naval ammunition depot was located 10 miles away from McAlester which was the only available liberty area for the black Marines. Once outside the limits of the depot, the "Jim Crow" laws of Oklahoma were strictly enforced against the blacks, beginning with the bus ride into town. Once in McAlester, the men were virtually restricted to the east end of the town, an area of about three blocks. Recreation for the visiting black Marines was in competition with that of the local black population of about 2,000.

In addition to the Jim Crow laws, O'Donnell pointed out, the customs of the area brought considerable restriction and limitation. The commanding officer felt:

... the Marine Corps is not now maintaining the high esteem of public opinion or gaining in prestige by the manner in which its uniform and insignia are subjected to such laws. The uniform does not count, it is relegated to the background and made to participate in and suffer the restrictions and limitations placed on it by virtue of the wearer being subject to the Jim Crow laws.²²

It was his conclusion that for the good of the Marine Corps, black Marines should not be assigned to McAlester. In an endorsement to O'Donnell's letter, the Commanding Officer, Naval Ammunition Depot suggested that the assignment of black Marines "to areas where there is a relatively large colored population would result in the availability of far better recreation and leave areas for them."²³

The Division of Plans and Policies received O'Donnell's letter and, after study, recommended to the Commandant that the black Marines be removed from McAlester and that the Marine Barracks, Naval Magazine, Port Chicago, California, be substituted as a post. This, combined with a plan for utilizing the Marine Barracks, Naval Ammunition Depot, Earle, New Jersey, would provide a post on each coast. The proposal was approved by General Vandegrift on 13 December 1946.²⁴ The Chief of Naval Operations, Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, concurred on 6 January 1947 provided the Navy's policy of non-racial discrimination was complied with.²⁵

Some changes in the strength of black Marines were approved by the Commandant of 6 January 1947. The overall requirement for black personnel, which had been cut from 2,800 to 2,302, was now further reduced to 1,500. Of these, 1,150 were to be general duty Marines and 350 were to be stewards. This cut was largely due to the cancellation of requirements for anti-aircraft artillery elements on Guam and Saipan, the modification of plans for utilization of the 3d AAA Battalion so as to exclude it from the planned operating forces, and a reduction in the authorized enlisted strength of the Corps by budgetary limitations.

It was decided because of the changed situation to suspend black first enlistments until 1 July 1947, at which time the subject would be restudied. The training of black recruits at Montford Point would be discontinued upon the completion of the training period of the recruits already there. Future recruit training would be conducted at the Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina, by separate black

platoons, and the Stewards Schools would be moved from Montford Point to Parris Island. Second thoughts, however, brought about the revocation of the last three changes on 31 January.²⁶

Plans to assign black Marines to Port Chicago received a jolt when a communication from the Commandant, 12th Naval District, dated 5 March 1947, reached Headquarters.²⁷ The gist of the message was that in view of present and possible future labor disturbances, it was not considered desirable to assign a black detachment to any activity in the San Francisco Bay area where labor conditions were in almost constant turmoil. The situation at Port Chicago had not improved any by 6 June, when the admiral's opinion was that "in areas predominantly white but with considerable colored population, with almost constant labor difficulties, possible clashes between colored guards and white pickets invites racial conflict."²⁸

A survey in mid-1947 showed that there were approximately 2,200 black Marines out of a total Corps strength of 93,000, or about 700 more blacks than the estimated requirements. The survey indicated that those who might be considered for discharge (men with overseas service and with dependents) amounted to about the same number as the overage. The Commandant then approved certain discharges "for the convenience of the government" to reduce the number to the requirements.²⁹ At the same time, the requisite number of stewards was not volunteering for service nor were many men remaining in the Stewards' Branch on the expiration of enlistment. There was at least some attempt to "encourage" excess general duty black Marines to switch to steward's duty. At Headquarters, Marine Corps the action was viewed as an attempt "to solicit additional volunteers."³⁰ At Montford Point this translated into the word being passed to the senior black NCOs of a pending order that they would have to serve as stewards. As one of them recalled: "We were instructed that we would either sign a statement that we would serve for steward's duty only or we would accept a discharge."³¹ This news, in the words of "Hashmark" Johnson, was greeted with "absolute consternation," and the majority of black general duty Marines "were determined to get out if need be rather than accept it."³² There was vehement opposition to the proposed move, opposition that reached into influential black circles in

Washington, and the forced transfers or discharges never materialized. At Montford Point nobody signed up for steward's duty, and as one NCO recalled "we just waited to see what the hell was going to happen and it faded away."³³

The proposed reduction in the numbers of black Marines brought about a new allocation of personnel. Port Chicago was scheduled to receive 120 men during the summer of 1947. In view of Navy opposition that had surfaced towards the assignment of blacks to Earle, New Jersey, a substitution was made of the 92-man 2d Guard Company, Marine Barracks, Naval Shipyard, Brooklyn, New York, a security detachment for the naval installations of Bayonne, New Jersey. FMF ground forces were to be two medium depot companies, one light depot company, and one depot platoon, for a total of 579 men. Training activities at Montford Point, including 180 recruits in training (60 a month), would take 337. Nonavailables would take 98, for a grand total of 1,226 general duty Marines. The removal from McAlester and the replacement of whites by blacks in the guard company at Bayonne were both to take place in July.³⁴

On 18 June 1947, the plan for assignment of black Marines to Port Chicago was revoked.³⁵ On the same day the Commandant approached the Navy about the possibility of assigning blacks to the Marine Barracks, Naval Ammunition Depot, Hingham, Massachusetts and to the Marine Barracks, Naval Ammunition Depot, Fort Mifflin, Pennsylvania.³⁶ Action was deferred at the same time on the proposed assignment of black Marines to the 2d Guard Company at Bayonne.³⁷

The report from Fort Mifflin indicated that the assignment of black Marines was feasible. It was suggested that a white first sergeant and four staff sergeants be retained to furnish supervision and that the replacement of certain key personnel be an overlapping procedure. Still, this was not a large detachment, as the table of organization provided for just two officers and 48 enlisted men.³⁸

Numerous objections were received on the proposal to station black Marines at the Hingham ammunition depot. The commanding officer was greatly concerned with the need for skilled fire fighters and implied that black Marines might not have "the suitability or adaptability." He further pointed out that the surrounding communities were almost com-

pletely white, affording virtually no recreation, housing, or other welfare facilities. A third objection was that since this was a restricted residential area and a major summer beach resort for New England, "the assignment of Negro Marines to this command would have very adverse effect on the civilian population which would be detrimental to the Marine Corps and the Naval Service."³⁹

On 10 July 1947, the Commander, Naval Base, New York, reversed the decision to send black Marines to Bayonne, and advocated their being stationed at Earle, as presenting "less problems and difficulties than at any other Naval activity." This post could utilize the services of up to 175 men.⁴⁰ A new target date of 15 August was suggested for the change from McAlester to Earle and Fort Mifflin. The Commandant approved of this but turned "thumbs down" on the initiation of active inquiry leading to the possible assignment of black troops to the Marine Barracks, Naval Operating Base, Trinidad, British West Indies.⁴¹

The Marine Corps hardly had time to congratulate itself on finally solving its problem when a letter came from the Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance through the Chief of Naval Operations asking for the retention of the present Marine detachment at Earle and the cancellation of orders assigning black Marines to the ammunition depot. The Navy said that a recent decision to handle ammonium nitrate at Earle had so changed the situation as to make it unwise to relieve the present trained detachment. The situation was further complicated by the introduction of contract civilian stevedores and by the planned mixing of Army MPs (white) with the Marine detachment which would involve the use of the same barracks and mess.⁴²

General Vandegrift revoked the planned transfer to Earle on 20 August 1947, leaving the transfer from McAlester to Fort Mifflin unchanged.⁴³ Eight days later, the Division of Plans and Policies came up with the suggestion that the Marine Barracks, Naval Supply Depot, Scotia, New York, be made a black post, providing billets for 54 men. It was also planned to provide 170 additional billets by the assignment of black Marines to the Marine Barracks, Naval Ammunition Depot, Lualualei, Oahu, Hawaii.⁴⁴

The word from Hawaii was favorable, but the Navy objected to the use of black Marines



Master Sergeant Gilbert H. "Hashmark" Johnson, sergeant major of Montford Point Camp in 1948, watches Private John W. Davis cut a stencil for a camp order. (USMC Photo 505211).

at Scotia as "weakening of the local public relations image now held by the Navy." Further objections were to the joint billeting of 25 Marine Graves Registration Escorts (white); the letter stated that the use of black Marines for Marine firing squads for the funerals of war dead would be "undesirable" and pointed out that the local black population was quite small, making for extremely limited recreational and social opportunities for black troops.⁴⁵

The first transfer was effected on 14 September 1947 when a mass change of personnel was made at McAlester, with 112 black Marines being transferred back to Montford Point. On the same day, 50 men were sent from Montford to replace the white Marines at Fort Mifflin.

A new set of decisions was reached by the Marine Corps on 19 November 1947 when General Vandegrift approved: (1) the reopening of black enlistments at the rate of 40 a month; (2) the processing of these recruits at Montford Point; (3) the assignment of a black enlisted complement to the barracks at Earle, New Jersey, on or about 1 February 1948; and (4) the assignment of a black barracks detachment to the Naval Ammunition Depot at Lualualei on or about 1 December 1948.⁴⁶

The Navy Bureau of Ordnance again objected to the assignment of blacks to Earle, but

the Chief of Naval Operations supported the Commandant's decision with a letter concluding: "A preponderance of factors indicates no practical action other than the effectuation of the subject assignment."⁴⁷ The transfer to Earle took place on 30 January 1948 when 138 black enlisted men reported on board. A mass transfer out of white troops took place on 6 February, leaving white officers, headed by Major Bennett G. Powers, and a cadre of white NCOs. These later were later replaced by black NCOs of comparable rank.

Finally, with decisions reached as to the locations of the guard detachments, an assignment schedule for 968 general duty black Marines was drafted. Five small depot units would account for 360 men. The barracks at Earle, Fort Mifflin, and Lualualei would account for 337 men, Montford Point would take 134, with 10 in specialist schools, and 30 recruits in training, and 97 men would be non-available. The total allotted for steward's duty was 420, making the total authorized black Marine strength 1,388 men.

The Marine Corps had made an honest effort to find posts to which it could assign blacks in segregated units. The cutback in strength of the Corps overall actually advanced the cause of integration because it was becoming increasingly apparent that the maintenance of separate training facilities was uneconomical. The difficulty of finding acceptable duty stations for black units undoubtedly contributed further to the ultimate solution to the problem, the end of segregation. The final impetus was to come from the White House.

Truman and Integration

A push away from segregation in the Armed Forces and towards integration was furnished by the organization on 23 November 1947 of the Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training. The two most prominent leaders were A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and Grant Reynolds, formerly a Republican city councilman from Harlem. Headquarters for the new committee was the New York union office of the Sleeping Car Porters. The basic principle implied in the organization's title received strong support from black citizens and the black press.⁴⁸

The climate was right to provide effective political pressure against segregation because

President Harry Truman, on the recommendation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was ready to propose the imposition of a peacetime draft. On 17 March 1948, he asked Congress to enact such legislation. Just five days later, Mr. Randolph led a delegation to the White House where he reportedly told the President that blacks did not want "to shoulder a gun to fight for democracy abroad unless they get democracy at home."⁴⁹

When the public portions of the hearings on the draft bill were reached, Mr. Randolph challenged the Senate Armed Services Committee with his statement: "Today I would like to make it clear to this committee and through you to Congress and the American people that passage now of a Jim Crow draft may only result in mass civil disobedience."⁵⁰ Although it was approved by many blacks, the Randolph declaration did not go unchallenged. At Montford Point, now-titled Master Sergeant "Hashmark" Johnson wrote a long letter to President Truman on 31 March taking exception to Mr. Randolph's extreme position, calling it "biased and dangerous." He assured the President "that whatever crisis comes, foreign or domestic, the American Negro will be in there pitching for all he is worth, alongside other fellow Americans." His letter, forwarded through channels, reached the President who replied that he had read it "with a great deal of interest."⁵¹

Sergeant Johnson had not been demoted. His new rank was the result of a sweeping change of designations. On 1 December 1946, the Marine Corps had done away with the multiplicity of enlisted rank titles that had grown up during the war and the years before and settled on one title for each of the seven enlisted pay grades: Master Sergeant; Technical Sergeant; Staff Sergeant; Sergeant; Corporal; Private First Class; and Private. Sergeant Major Johnson, for example, became a master sergeant but still retained the appointment of sergeant major.

When the new peacetime draft act was signed into law on 24 June 1948, President Truman was not long in following it with an anti-discrimination order. After the Democratic National Convention in July which featured a dramatic walkout of southern delegates following a losing battle over a liberal civil rights plank, the President promulgated Executive Order 9981 on 26 July 1948 which banned color bias in the Armed Services. A

seven man board to be named later, and titled "President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services," was to investigate rules and practises to see if changes should be made. Mr. Truman assured reporters on 29 July that racial segregation would eventually be abolished in all services.⁵²

The President announced the membership of his committee on 18 September 1948. Best known as the "Fahy Committee" after its chairman, former U.S. Solicitor General Charles H. Fahy, it included A. J. Donahue, Dwight R. G. Palmer, Charles Luckman, William E. Stevenson, Lester Granger, and John A. Sengstacke as members.⁵³ The committee conducted its inquiries with a spirit of understanding and cooperation with the Armed Services, but still it prodded and prompted more effective compliance with existing regulations which if conscientiously carried out would have ended segregation in time. A particular target was all-black units and the philosophy that kept them in being. When the committee made its report to the President in 1950 just prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, *Time* magazine commented on its findings:

The committee did not argue the moral or sociological aspects of the case. It based its arguments on efficiency. There were bright Negroes and there were dumb ones, just like white men. To refuse a job to an intelligent or skilled Negro was simply a waste of manpower. Concentration of unskilled Negroes in segregated units just multiplied their inefficiency.⁵⁴

Some officers at Marine Corps Headquarters felt rather strongly that it was not the Marine Corps place to lead the fight against segregation. On 17 March 1949, the Commandant, General Clifton D. Cates, objected to a proposed directive of the Armed Forces Personnel Policy Board, another civilian review panel, which advocated a policy of equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the Armed Forces without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.

General Cates first indicated that he thought the board had exceeded its authority in developing the draft directive. It was his feeling that the National Military Establishment could not "be an agency for experimentation in civil liberty without detriment to its ability to maintain the efficiency and high state of readiness so essential to national defense." The Commandant supported the principle that "allocation of personnel on a qualitative and quantitative basis to meet the needs of the Armed

Forces should be made without regard to race, color, religion or national origin," but protested vigorously that:

The problem of segregation is not the responsibility of the Armed Forces but is a problem of the nation. Changing national policy in this respect through the Armed Forces is a dangerous path to pursue in as much as it affects the ability of the National Military Establishment to fulfill its mission . . . Should the time arise that non-segregation, and this term applies to white as well as negro, is accepted as a custom of the nation, this policy can be adopted without detriment by the National Military Establishment."⁵⁴

Like General Holcomb's remarks in 1942 before blacks entered the Marine Corps, General Cates' opinions had little effect upon the course of change. On 20 April 1949, Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson ordered the Armed Services to end racial discrimination in line with President Truman's Executive Order 9981. The Secretary's directive provided that "all individuals, regardless of race, will be accorded equal opportunity for appointment, advancement, professional improvement, promotion." Segregated units could continue but on a permissive rather than a mandatory basis.⁵⁶

Secretary of the Navy Francis P. Matthews issued ALNAV 49-447 on 23 June 1949 which was a landmark declaration of racial policy in the Navy and the Marine Corps, dealing as it did with racial segregation as well as discrimination. The pertinent portions read:

2. It is the policy of the Navy Department that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the Navy and Marine Corps without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.

3. In their attitude and day-to-day conduct of affairs, officers and enlisted personnel of the Navy and Marine Corps shall adhere rigidly and impartially to the Navy Regulations, in which no distinction is made between individuals wearing the uniform of these services.

4. All personnel will be enlisted or appointed, trained, advanced or promoted, assigned duty, and administered in all respects without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.

5. In the utilization of housing, messing, berthing, and other facilities, no special or unusual provisions will be made for the accommodation of any minority race.⁵⁷

A few months later, on 18 November 1949, the Marine Corps issued a memorandum of guidance to commanders establishing policy regarding black Marines. It revoked all previous policy statements including those prohibiting mixed units. However, all black units of

platoon strength or larger, both regular and reserve, were to be continued. Commanders of organized reserve units could accept or reject men for their unit, but not on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin. Most important (and this appears to be the official beginning of integration in the Marine Corps), it stated: "Individual negro Marines will be assigned in accordance with MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] to vacancies in any unit where their services can be effectively utilized."⁵⁸

The memorandum actually postdated the end of Montford Point as a segregated facility and the dispersal of its men to both mixed and black units. In practice, the process of desegregation had begun in the Marine Corps on a gradual, local, and *ad hoc* basis well before the official word filtered down.

The End In Sight

Athletic teams, in the Marine Corps as in civilian life, were one of the first means of integration in the postwar period. At Camp Lejeune black all stars from the Montford Point teams which played in camp intra-unit competition were selected to play on camp teams which engaged in inter-service play. In the 1947-1948 season, the Montford Point basketball team won the intra-unit competition and some of its star members became part of the team that represented Camp Lejeune. In other sports, the athletic abilities of some black Marines won them a place on other camp teams, particularly in track, football, and boxing. Boxing had been an integrated sport overseas during the war and it continued to be one after the fighting ended; it was foolish to deny men a place on the team on the basis of race when Montford Point harbored men like Sergeant Charles W. Riggs, formerly of the 35th Marine Depot Company, who had been the All Service Heavyweight Champion of Pacific Ocean Areas, Forward, on Guam.⁵⁹

Although black Marines continued to be quartered on a segregated basis, increasing numbers of blacks began to work side by side with whites on the basis of common military occupational specialties. Letter of Instruction 421 of 20 March 1943, which had directed that no black Marines would be placed in positions where they would command whites, was rescinded on 14 February 1946.⁶⁰ As the natural course of events evolved, situations arose

where black NCOs of necessity were placed in the position where they were responsible for giving orders to white Marines junior to them. Such events were not commonplace but they did occur, and it was prejudicial to discipline to allow any exception to the general rules of military precedence and order.

The number of black Marines was so relatively small that it became uneconomical in the austere postwar period to continue separate training facilities for specialists at Montford Point. Stewards, cooks, bakers, and eventually all specialists were trained at Camp Lejeune schools, in mixed classes for the most part. The necessary recruit influx to maintain the number of blacks authorized on active duty was small and recruit training was switched to Parris Island in the spring of 1949 as a measure of efficiency and economy. At first there were separate black platoons under black DIs, but by fall the decision was made to effect complete integration.

The Commanding General, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, during this period was Major General Alfred H. Noble, who recalled in an oral history interview:

Also while I was there we integrated for the first time the black people into the Marine Corps recruit platoons right with the white trainees. This was done as soon as they arrived at Parris Island. I believe I said some time ago that before that time we would wait for the number of colored troops to build up to the proper size of a recruit platoon and then they trained as a separate unit. While I was there the NCO clubs also were opened up to the colored non-commissioned officers. This innovation not only produced no unfavorable reaction among the Marines, but it also had no unfavorable reaction among the civilian citizens of South Carolina in the vicinity. Of course, I consulted the civilian leaders first and told them what I was going to do and got their advice and promises of help to try and stop any adverse criticism of it. It seemed like integration was due to take place sooner or later anyway in this country, certainly in the Armed Forces, and I thought that it should take place in the Armed Forces first.⁶¹

General Noble's remarks indicate that the opposition to integration in the Marine Corps was by no means universal at the highest levels. Many Marines, white and black, shared his views that the Armed Forces were in a unique position to promote desegregation. But there were plenty of white Marines of all ranks who preferred the racial *status quo* and the treatment by some of these men of the first black regular officer was described by him as "un-sympathetic."⁶²

John E. Rudder, born in Paducah, Kentucky, served in the 51st Defense Battalion after his enlistment in June 1943 and was selected for the V-12 program, attending Purdue University. After his discharge in 1946, he continued at Purdue as a regular NROTC (Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps) midshipman destined for a regular commission. In June 1948, he was appointed a second lieutenant, USMC, and in September started the Basic School course for new officers. Upon reconsideration of his circumstances, Lieutenant Rudder decided to resign his commission, stating to a black reporter that his reason "could be described as religious scruples."⁶³ He was honorably discharged on 1 April 1949.

At the same time Rudder was appointed, June 1948, William K. Jenkins from Elizabethtown, New Jersey, a contract NROTC graduate from Illinois Polytechnic Institute and a Navy veteran of World War II, was commissioned a reserve second lieutenant and assigned to inactive duty. Lieutenant Jenkins, in 1973 a reserve lieutenant colonel, was called to active duty in the Korean War, where he became the first black officer to lead Marines in combat as both a weapons and a rifle platoon commander with Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines.

Another segregation barrier was broken in 1949 when the first black women enlisted in the Marine Corps. During World War II, the lack of separate housing facilities, plus the fact that white Women Reserves early filled the authorized complement for women acted against blacks being enlisted. On the passage of the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 12 June 1948, women became a part of the regular Marine Corps for the first time.⁶⁴ In November, the first officers and enlisted women, all veterans of World War II service, were sworn in as regulars and provisions were made for limited recruiting. On 8 March 1949, Mr. A. Philip Randolph, acting for the Committee Against Jim Crow, directed a question to the Commandant: "We should like to ascertain if Negro women were eligible to join the Marines and if so whether on a basis of non-segregation."⁶⁵ General Cates' reply two days later said: "If qualified for enlistment, negro women will be accepted on the same basis as other applicants."⁶⁶

Six months later on 8 September 1949 the first black woman Marine, Annie E. Graham, enlisted at Detroit, Michigan, and on the following day Ann E. Lamb joined at New York



Warrant Officer Annie L. Grimes, the third black woman to enlist in the Marine Corps in 1950, is shown in 1968 with Colonel Barbara J. Bishop, Director of Women Marines. (USMC Photo A416512).

City. The two women reported to Parris Island on 10 September and went through boot camp together with Platoon 5-A of the 3d Recruit Training Battalion. Both subsequently reported for duty at Headquarters Marine Corps. The third black woman to join, Annie L. Grimes of Chicago, who was destined to become a chief warrant officer later in her career, joined and went to boot camp in February 1950. From the beginning, the reception, training, and housing of black women Marines was completely integrated.

The treatment accorded black women was undoubtedly a reflection of what was happening elsewhere in the Corps. Not all black general duty Marines in 1949 were being assigned to segregated units, scattered individuals began to show up on the rolls of previously all-white commands in accordance with their MOSs. But the real turning point away from segregated units awaited the closing of

Montford Point Camp as a black training center and barracks area.

The strength of the troops in the camp remained about the same during 1949, roughly six officers and 300 enlisted men. Major Frank W. Ferguson, by then the camp commander, also doubled in brass as the supply officer. Ferguson, a former quartermaster clerk who had fought and been captured at Corregidor, had served at Montford Point since March 1946 and was destined to preside over the dissolution of the segregated facility.⁶⁷ On 9 September 1949, Headquarters Company, Montford Point Camp was deactivated and the remaining 242 officers and men on the rolls were transferred, for the most part to other Camp Lejeune units.

The deactivation marked the end of an era for black Marines; it came just a little over seven years after the first boots had reported for training. To some black Marines it meant

the end of an ordered and familiar existence where they were sure of coming "home" to Montford Point periodically. One veteran, Edgar R. Huff, then a master sergeant, expressed this view when he commented on the effect of the official advent of integration, recalling:

. . . that was a sad day, it was a black day, a black mark as far as I'm concerned. Myself, and to my knowledge the majority of black Marines . . . we wanted to stay together, we had our own camp, we had our own resources, and we were taken care of, holding our own we called it at that time, and didn't care to go anyplace. I was sorry to see it happen.⁶⁸

From a somewhat different point of view, "Hashmark" Johnson, who at the time Montford Point closed down was sergeant major of the barracks at Earle, New Jersey,

commented on the attitude of the black Marines towards integration:

Some of them saw it as a gradual phasing out of the Negro Marine and others saw it as an opportunity to show they were equal in proficiency and all other qualifications to their white counterparts. Some welcomed the opportunity and others were just a bit scared of it.⁶⁹

Scared, pleased, unhappy, or indifferent, black Marines had at last achieved a goal that many people both inside and outside the Marine Corps had worked for. There were still all-black units in the Corps, but there were integrated units as well, and the trend was irreversibly towards a completely integrated Marine Corps. The outbreak of the Korean War measurably accelerated the desegregation process.

CHAPTER 6

A DECADE OF INTEGRATION

On 30 June 1950, immediately following the outbreak of the Korean War, there were 1,502 black Marines on active duty, 1,075 on general duty assignments and 427 serving as stewards.¹ In overall strength the Marine Corps stood at 74,279, its post-World War II low.² Three years later, as the war was drawing to a close, 14,731 black Marines were on active duty, only 538 of whom were stewards. The overall strength of the Marine Corps was 249,219, its peak for the Korean War.³ The growth in the number of black Marines from two percent of the Corp's strength to six percent accurately reflected the end of segregation. Certainly the manpower demands of the war hastened the change, but the combat performance of black Marines in integrated units did nothing to lessen the pace.

In July 1950, a thin sprinkling of blacks went out to Korea with the first units to see combat in the Pusan Perimeter, the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, which included the 5th Marines and Marine Aircraft Group 33. Still more men followed in August and September when the 1st Marine Division and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing deployed to take part in the amphibious assault at Inchon and the capture of Seoul. Men from barracks detachments, including those at Earle, Ft. Mifflin, and Lualualei, from 2d Marine Division units, and from virtually every post and station in the Marine Corps were used to bring the deployed units up to war strength. Typically, the 6th Marines of the 2d Division, augmented by recalled reservists and men from the supporting establishment, was used as a nucleus to form the 7th Marines of the 1st Division. The regimental commander, Colonel Homer A. Litzenberg, Jr., recalled, after his men had fought their way out of the Chosin Reservoir trap, that "one of the miscellaneous units he received" when he activated the 7th Marines "was a 54-man Negro service unit which was integrated throughout the command." He commented to the press:

Never once did any color problem bother us . . . It just wasn't any problem. We had one Negro sergeant in command of an all-white squad and there was another—with a graves registration unit—who was one of the finest Marines I've ever seen.⁴

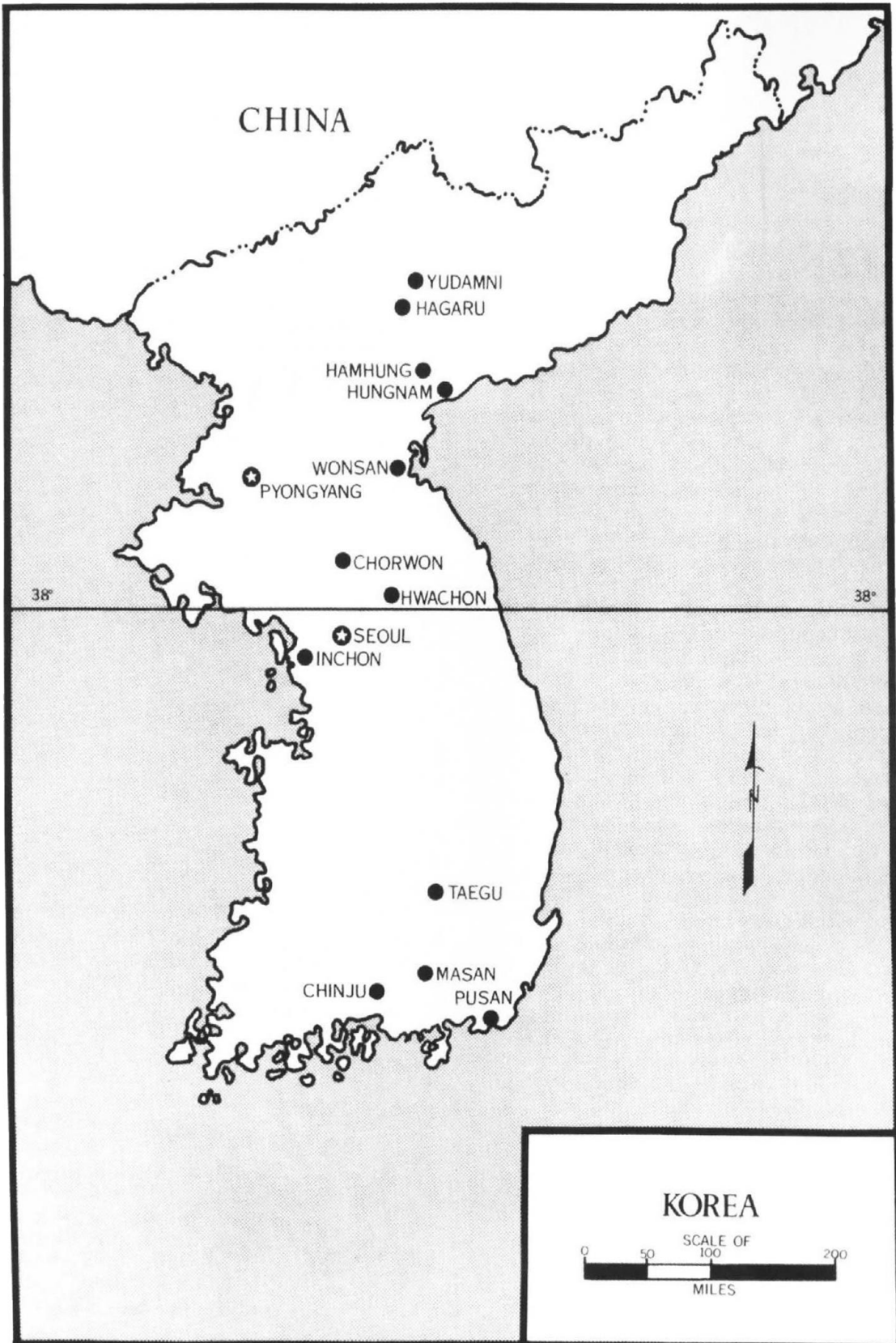
These remarks coming from one of the Corps distinguished combat leaders, a highly decorated former enlisted man with nearly 30 years of active service,⁵ were echoed by the division commander, then Major General Oliver P. Smith. In an oral history memoir of his career, the general was asked if his division was integrated. He replied:

Oh yes, I had a thousand Negroes, and we had no racial troubles. The men did whatever they were qualified to do. There were communicators, there were cooks, there were truck drivers, there were plain infantry—they did everything, and they did a good job because they were integrated, and they were with good people . . . Two of these Negroes got the Navy Cross. There was no fooling; they were real citations, and there were plenty of *Silvers Stars* and *Bronze Stars*, and what have you. And I had no complaint on their performance of duty.⁶

The mention of the Navy Cross awards highlights a peculiar problem that arises when the story of black Marines in the Korean War is researched. Short of the lengthy task of matching up the individual record books of every recipient of a medal with his citation, there is no way of determining which of these men was black. Records pertaining to black Marines, aside from strength and deployment statistics, are virtually nonexistent. With the end of segregation, black Marines merged into the mainstream of Marine Corps experience.

Throughout much of the Korean War and the decade that followed, the trace of black Marines is extremely hard to follow. There are no pertinent unit records for there were no black units. Moreover, there was a conscious policy of cutting down on the number and variety of reports which included race as a reporting element. In June of 1953, there were 30 such records required by various Depart-

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ment of Defense agencies; 17 of these were eliminated. By April 1954 the number of records with a racial reporting element was down to 10. Many of these few were required only to ensure that personnel assignments were equitably made.⁷ In large part, therefore, the narrative thread of the story of black Marines in the 1950s has been extracted from the experiences and reminiscences of a few representative officers and men whose careers spanned these years. Fortunately, they were perceptive observers as well as being intimately a part of the process of change.

Combat In Korea

Among the various scattered records of black Marines there is an occasional human interest story that highlights the advent of integration. On 5 December 1949, a black World War II veteran, former Corporal Walter Chandler, wrote to Headquarters Marine Corps from his home in Addyston, Ohio asking if the Marine Corps' recruiting advertisements broadcast over the radio were meant for whites only or for any Americans able and willing to serve. If blacks were being accepted, he wanted to recommend a young man by the name of Donald Woody as a potential Marine. In reply, Headquarters asked Mr. Woody to contact the local recruiter in Cincinnati, Ohio; if found qualified he would be welcome.⁸ The sequel is found in the casualty files of Headquarters where it is noted the Corporal Donald Woody served with Company I, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines in Korea and was wounded twice in combat.⁹

Thousands of black Marines matched Corporal Woody's experience in fighting side-by-side with white Marines as part of the same unit. They were needed and they were accepted for what they were. As one young white lieutenant, Herbert M. Hart, wrote to his college newspaper in late 1952 regarding his battalion:

It doesn't make any difference if you are white, red, black, green, or turquoise to the men over here. No record is kept by color. When we receive a draft of men they are assigned by name and experience only . . . There's no way we can find out a man's color until we see him and by that time he's already in a foxhole, an integral part of his team.¹⁰

As one of Hart's men commented: "After you've been here a while, you'll see that color doesn't make any difference. It's the guts that



Having fired his 57mm recoilless rifle at Chinese Communist positions, a black Marine gunner heads for cover in case of incoming enemy fire. (USMC Photo A173312).

count." And as the lieutenant observed, "color doesn't seem to be any register of guts."¹¹

Certainly he had ample evidence of this in his own unit. PFC (later Corporal) A C Clark, a short-statured black automatic rifleman from Minden, Louisiana serving with Company H, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, won a Silver Star on 13 December 1952 for aggressively covering the evacuation of two wounded Marines of his combat patrol, silencing an enemy machine gun, killing three enemy soldiers, and helping to evacuate other American casualties although wounded twice himself.¹² Since PFC Clark previously had been awarded a Bronze Star for rescuing his wounded platoon leader on another combat patrol in August, he "served" as one of his citations states "to inspire all who observed him."¹³

There were other black Marines like Clark, recognized combat heroes, and there were legions of those who did their jobs in an unspectacular, steady, and efficient manner. The continual flow of replacements soon brought some of the senior black line NCOs to Korea, men who had been leaders in segregated units and

who now took their place in previously all-white units. Master Sergeant Edgar R. Huff, who had been the guard chief of the Marine Barracks at Earle, ended up as gunnery sergeant of Weapons Company, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines. Moving into the infantry replacement training cycle at Camp Pendleton in June 1951, he was platoon commander of a "Zebra" platoon, composed entirely of white staff NCOs, and noted that he "certainly couldn't have been treated any better than I was" in his first experience in an integrated outfit.¹⁴ When he arrived at his battalion's lines on the east central front in Korea, he found himself the only black man in his company and an object of some awe and speculation as he stood about six foot, five inches tall and was built along the lines of a professional football lineman. In his words:

I decided the first thing for me to do was to call my company together and let them see this monster that they had been hearing about . . . [I told them] that I was the company gunnery sergeant, and I wanted them to know that under all circumstances I was the company gunnery sergeant, not the figurehead, but the company gunnery sergeant, and they understood that . . .¹⁵

Huff's experience of being the only black Marine in a company-sized unit was not uncommon in 1950 and 1951, but it became far less so as the war continued. Over 10,000 blacks joined the Corps between June 1951 and July 1952 and many of these men reached Korea to serve in combat.¹⁶ Scattered throughout the 1st Division and 1st Wing, they filled the billets for which their training and experience fitted them, and they earned the respect of their fellow Marines in direct ratio to how well they did their job. When a veteran NCO like Master Sergeant Gilbert "Hashmark" Johnson arrived in Korea, he was given a progression of responsible jobs which fitted his background: personnel chief of the 1st Shore Party Battalion; first sergeant of the battalion's Company A; personnel sergeant major of the forward echelon of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines; and administrative advisor at the Headquarters of the Korean Marine Corps. Asked if he had experienced any problems as a senior black NCO serving in predominantly white units, Johnson characteristically said: "I didn't encounter any difficulty. I accepted each individual for what he was and apparently they accepted me for what I was."¹⁷



Led by a black Marine, a light machine gun squad of Company D, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines moves up to reinforce the front lines in July 1953. (USMC Photo A173715).

Black Leaders

While there were thousands of black enlisted men who served in Korea, there was only a handful of black officers. Lieutenant William K. Jenkins, the first black officer to lead Marines in combat, served as platoon leader with Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines in 1951–1952. A few other ground officers reached Korea during the fighting and one pilot, Second Lieutenant Frank E. Petersen, Jr.

The first black officer to be commissioned in the Marine Corps from the Naval Aviation Cadet Program, Petersen was only the fourth of his race to receive the naval aviator designation. In choosing an aviation career, he was particularly inspired by the example of Ensign Jesse L. Brown, the first black naval aviator, who was killed while flying close support for the Marines breaking out from the Chosin Reservoir on 4 December 1950. Petersen, from Topeka, Kansas, enlisted in the Navy after a year of college and then entered the cadet program. Determined to be the first black Marine pilot, he received both his wings and his commission at Pensacola on 1 October 1952. After advanced flight training in the States, he reported to Marine Attack Squadron 212 in Korea in April 1953. Flying the attack version Corsair, Petersen completed 64 combat

missions before the fighting ended, earning a Distinguished Flying Cross and six Air Medals. In 1973 he was the senior black regular officer in the Marine Corps as a lieutenant colonel.¹⁸

Most of the black officers who were commissioned during the war were reserves who were released to inactive duty after completing a normal tour, but a few like Petersen stayed on to become regulars. Kenneth H. Berthoud, Jr. from New York City, the second officer to receive a regular commission, was a graduate of Long Island University with a major in biology. A naval reserve hospital corpsman while attending school, he entered the Marine Corps as a candidate for a commission and was designated a second lieutenant in the reserve on 13 December 1952 and a regular officer on 13 July 1953. Posted overseas to serve as a tank officer in the 3d Marine Division in Japan, he also served with the 1st Tank Battalion on occupation duty in Korea. Subsequently becoming a supply officer, he served in many responsible assignments in the logistics field and in 1973 was a lieutenant colonel assigned to Headquarters Marine Corps in the Installations and Logistics Department.¹⁹

Another black officer, Hurdle L. Maxwell, enlisted in the Marine Corps during the Korean War after three years at Indiana State Teachers College and was commissioned a reserve second lieutenant in March 1953 and a regular officer in September after completing The Basic School at Quantico. Like Kenneth Berthoud, he served originally as a tank officer with the 3d and 1st Tank Battalions in Japan and Korea; he later held other staff and command assignments in FMF and supporting establishment units. In January 1969, three months after his promotion to lieutenant colonel, he reported to the 2d Marine Division to become the first black officer to command an infantry battalion, the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Maxwell retired in 1971 after serving on active duty for over 20 years.²⁰

These few men, and others who slowly followed them into the Marine Corps to serve as pilots and ground officers in the 1950s, had to have, of necessity, a special quality of personal integrity and professional pride. They could never be inconspicuous wherever they served; they were, in a real sense, marked men. They represented black Marines as a group and whatever they did, however well they performed their jobs, was to many men the



First black Marine pilot, Second Lieutenant Frank E. Petersen, Jr., climbs into his Corsair shortly after arriving in Korea in April 1953. (USMC Photo A347177).

measure of what could be expected from black Marines in leadership positions. Never until the Vietnam era more than a small fraction of one percent of active duty officers, the black officers were well aware of their role and their responsibilities. There were few situations where they could afford to relax and none where they could afford to be average officers.

While all black officers in the 1950s were relatively junior in rank, there were a number of blacks in the top enlisted pay grade, master sergeant, men who had comparable time in the Corps with their white contemporaries. As they had in integrated units in combat in Korea, these black NCOs began to fill more and more leadership positions in peacetime units. One of these men was Edgar R. Huff, who was to establish an unbeatable string of firsts for black Marines, each one noted with pride by his fellow blacks who thereafter followed him into comparable positions.

In September 1952, shortly after he returned from Korea, Huff became the gunnery sergeant and then the first sergeant of Weapons Company, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines at Camp Lejeune. In February 1954, he became the battalion sergeant major, the first

black to hold such a position in an infantry battalion. In April 1955, he reported to the Marine Barracks, Port Lyautey, Morocco to serve as guard chief. At the end of the year he became the barracks sergeant major with the rank of sergeant major.

The Marine Corps had determined in 1955 to reinstitute the actual ranks of first sergeant and sergeant major within the top pay grade. Selection boards sat at Headquarters Marine Corps to pick the men who would hold both ranks from the master sergeants with combat and combat support occupational specialties. Huff was the only black Marine among those selected to both first sergeant and sergeant major. On 31 December 1955, he became a sergeant major, a rank he was to hold on active duty for almost 17 years until he was the senior sergeant major in point of service in the Marine Corps. As a revealing side light to Huff's promotion, the white master sergeant who had been sergeant major at Port Lyautey and who had not been selected for the higher rank indicated that he would rather retire than serve under a black man. The commanding officer of the barracks immediately contacted Headquarters Marine Corps, which adjudged the master sergeant's usefulness to the Marine Corps had ended and retired him as soon as he could be returned to the United States.²¹ Both the promotion and the retirement were a far cry from the days of segregation.

Huff went on in later assignments in the 1950s and early 1960s to become regimental sergeant major of the 2d Force Service Regiment at Camp Lejeune (1957-59), command sergeant major of Landing Force Training Command, Atlantic in Norfolk (1959-60), and regimental sergeant major of 3d Force Service Regiment on Okinawa (1961-62). His path to advancement was not always smooth and the cooperation received from some white officers and NCOs was not always exemplary for the first black sergeant major in every post he occupied. He was to recall later regarding his initial service in the 2d Force Service Regiment that "I did everything, bit my tongue till it scarred the bottom of my stomach, to get along with these people and also maintain the dignity of the position I held . . . And it was very difficult for me to do this."²² But he had the whole-hearted support of his commanding officer, Colonel Harlan C. Cooper, a Naval Academy graduate (Class of 1931) who had commanded the 1st Base Depot and the 16th

Field Depot during World War II.²³ Cooper soon made it evident to all concerned that Sergeant Major Huff was the regimental sergeant major and spoke with the colonel's authority in all matters concerning the enlisted men of the regiment.

There were many white commanding officers and senior NCOs like Colonel Cooper, men who were determined to make integration work. It was the official Marine Corps policy, often expressed in some variation of the catch phrase "every Marine is a green Marine." If, in retrospect, this attitude seems an oversimplification of a very complex problem, it was a pervading philosophy at the time. Although some white Marines harbored personal reservations and prejudices about integration, and others indulged in foot-dragging and showed thinly-masked hostility toward the effort, the main thrust of most Marines was toward the official goal.

In a sense, while Sergeant Major Huff led the way in many responsible senior enlisted assignments, his experiences were shared by other regular black line NCOs. They too had their chances to fill important billets that required judgement, maturity, and leadership. During most of the years following the Korean war, the number of black Marines stayed around 12-13,000 men and women while the enlisted strength of the Corps overall fluctuated from 205,275 (1954) to a low of 154,242 (1960).²⁴ Although the number of blacks remained below 10 percent, the ratio was substantially higher than it had been in the pre-Korea years. Many of these Marines had served since World War II and risen to the top pay grades. They were routinely assigned to the positions to which their rank and seniority entitled them. It became common for both black and white Marines to have blacks as their senior NCOs. The measure of a Marine was slowly but surely becoming how well he did his job, not what color his skin was.

Changing Times

Within the Marine Corps, the last vestige of military segregation at the end of the Korean War lay in the Stewards' Branch. The black Marines assigned to stewards' duty were still recruited under Steward Duty Only enlistment contracts or were augmented by volunteers from general duty blacks. There was a strong feeling among many of the stewards that this

volunteering was rigged and that men were assigned, presumably whenever the need arose, by manipulating their general classification test scores. Investigation showed there was at least some support for the truth of this rumor in local instances.²⁵ For many young blacks, there was a stigma attached to being an officers' steward; some obviously felt their position was subject to ridicule, particularly by other blacks. They did not like the thought of being irrevocably confined to one specialty, a specialty that was itself limited to blacks.

Two senior black steward NCOs, Technical Sergeants James E. Johnson and Leo McDowell, had both made a number of sugges-

tions to higher headquarters during the early 50s regarding the improvement of the quality of mess service and the quality of service life for stewards. In the spring of 1953, the Quartermaster General of the Marine Corps, Major General W. P. T. Hill, called the two men to Headquarters Marine Corps to listen to what they had to say. He gave them a chance to act on their recommendations and appointed them members of a Steward Inspection and Demonstration Team, later joined by white Warrant Officer Perry S. Brenton, which began to tour east and west coast officers' messes after developing a syllabus at Camp Lejeune. Aside from teaching advanced



Vice Chairman of the Civil Service Commission, the Honorable James E. Johnson, a retired Marine chief warrant officer (middle), sits with General Lewis W. Wall, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, and Mr. Richard L. Dalton, President of the Montford Point Marine Association, at a parade in Mr. Johnson's honor at the Marine Barracks, Washington in 1969. (USMC Photo 4419277).

techniques of mess cooking, service, and management, the two blacks inquired deeply into the living conditions and motivations of the men with whom they talked. They found that many stewards were dissatisfied with what they considered overly-long working hours, limited chances for advancement and in-service education, and, particularly, with the image of the Stewards' Branch as a place where they were "condemned" to serve as long as they were Marines.

Both Johnson and McDowell emphasized the positive side of stewards' duty, the chance of learning a trade that was a salable commodity in civilian life. They pointed out that stewards often had the opportunity to improve on their service pay. As Johnson noted:

. . . those young men who were stewards were able to make extra money because they had the skills. They were good bartenders and they always made extra money. They were good waiters and they could go to any restaurant and they made money. They were good caterers; they made extra money when they went out.²⁶

Setting an example of their own, both NCOs were heavily involved in off-duty educational courses and encouraged the black stewards to do the same after making sure through their efforts that adequate time was available to the men for this purpose.

Johnson, a most unusual man with a tremendous reservoir of talents, was also to show that it was really possible to advance as a result of doing a steward's job in a superior fashion. He was appointed a warrant officer in 1960 in the food administration field. He went on to hold supply and administrative billets, continuing all the while to increase his educational background. Shortly after he retired as a chief warrant officer in July 1965, he received his bachelor of arts degree, later to be joined by a degree of master of arts; he then went on to work for both juris doctor and doctor of philosophy degrees. In civilian life, he became in turn a very successful insurance salesman, the California State Commissioner of Veterans Affairs, the Vice Chairman of the Federal Civil Service Commission, and the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. All this was accomplished in the space of eight years by a man who had entered a segregated Marine Corps in 1944 as a private with a record book stamped "Colored" and an enlistment contract "Steward Duty Only."

Among the recommendations forwarded to

General Hill by the Brenton-Johnson-McDowell team was one that emerged in a favorable climate in 1954—to eliminate Steward Duty Only enlistments. The Secretary of the Navy did this for both the Navy and the Marine Corps on 1 March 1954.²⁷ The team also felt strongly that men who wanted to get out of the Stewards' Branch into other fields in the Marine Corps should have the opportunity to do so. When this came to pass, despite dire predictions of a wholesale exodus of black stewards, only 5-10 percent of the men opted for transfer. The ultimate step was to integrate the steward service field and this began to happen while Major General Joseph C. Burger commanded Camp Lejeune in 1956-57.²⁸ As white stewards increased in number the very human reaction of some black stewards was to try to hang on to choice jobs that they had. For now these positions were viewed in a different light. As then Warrant Officer Johnson later observed about the black stewards:

. . . they felt they were being discriminated against because they were all black. That was the real hang-up, you see. But the moment they opened it [stewards' duty], they said, "O. K., fine. It's all right." Because their feeling was that if it was so good, why don't you have some of the whites in it.²⁹

The gradual change in the image of stewards' duty and the attitude toward it by both black and white Marines was in a way a reflection of the immense social revolution that had its start in the 1950s. Like the integration of the Stewards' Branch, the racial integration of many other aspects of American life came about both as the result of evolutionary change and governmental intervention. Within the Marine Corps, there was no question that official policy called for the end of segregation, but the off-duty actions and attitudes of many white Marines belied this. These men were the products of home backgrounds where legal or *de facto* segregation was a way of life and they either approved of or went along with local customs and laws which demanded segregation in schools, housing, public places, and transportation facilities.

An inequitable situation existed in which black and white Marines served side by side in the ranks, but their children were separated in schools both on post and off. Off-base housing was often segregated and military quarters areas tended to be segregated too, movie theaters, even some on base, had separate racial seating areas, and commercial buses serv-

ing military posts in the South required blacks to sit in the rear. A black officer or enlisted man in Jacksonville, North Carolina, for instance, could be and was barred from normal civilian activities which were open to any of their white counterparts. This was an unhealthy situation, one which would take many years to change, but such change was indeed coming.

In a monumental decision that had far-ranging repercussions, the Supreme Court ruled on 17 May 1954 that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. The decision noted that: "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."³⁰ Even before this ruling was published, the Secretary of Defense, Charles E. Wilson, had ordered the Armed Forces to end school desegregation on military posts by 1 September 1955.³¹ If necessary, the Federal Government would operate the schools if local school districts did not comply with the order.

Subsequent rulings by the Supreme Court in cases which challenged the "separate but equal" doctrine, which had the force of law in the South and of custom in many other areas of the country, barred segregation in public recreational facilities (1955) and on board public transport vehicles (1956).³² Civil rights bills were passed by the Congress in 1957 and 1960 which were intended to ensure blacks a right to vote and to set up enforcement means that would guarantee unfettered elections.³³

There was vehement and all too often violent opposition to the end of legal segregation in many parts of the country. No amount of legislation or court rulings or government edicts could change long-held racial biases overnight. The pace of integration was often halting in the decade following the Korean War as legal challenges and illegal subterfuges were combined by white leaders to slow proceedings. Many American blacks, tired of "second-class citizen" status, were understandably impatient to experience the substance of meaningful integration. Black leaders could suddenly count on newly awakened racial awareness and solidarity, and at times militancy, to back their demands for civil rights progress. The rising generation of young black men and women was determined to live in an environment more to their own choosing than had been the lot of their parents.

This new consciousness of black individual and collective rights and worth would lead to many challenges to established customs, attitudes, and opinions. Where segregation had been abolished in fact as well as in law, as in the Armed Forces, blacks would now question the intent and will of whites to eliminate covert discrimination. The Marine Corps in the decade of the 60s and the Vietnam War years was to be troubled deeply by racial incidents, some of them violent clashes, while it sought ways to promote better understanding between white and black Marines.

CHAPTER 7

THE VIETNAM ERA

An introduction to a changing philosophy among a vocal segment of blacks in America was furnished by Elijah Muhammed in a speech to an estimated 4,000 Black Muslims in New York on 31 July 1960. He called for the creation of an exclusively American black state either in the United States or in Africa and urged his followers to tell whites, "If we are going to live together, there must be a state for you, a state for us."¹ His separatist sentiments were by no means confined to his own religious sect; they found support among other charismatic black leaders pursuing their own courses of action. The cry for black separation, however, was but one small manifestation of an overall heightened black consciousness. This was everywhere apparent in demands for instruction in black history and culture in the public schools, in cultivation of certain aspects of African life in dress, music, and hair styling, and in a recognition of the values of a separate black life style best expressed in the phrase "black is beautiful." One must be careful, however, not "to equate the long overdue recognition by the Negro of his African beginnings with a repudiation of his American loyalties."²

The influence of this new awareness of individual and racial worth on the urban youth who furnished most black Marine Corps recruits was profound. If, as was frequently the case, their educational preparation for service life was deficient and their classification scores consequently low, their assignment to soft skill tasks was viewed as evidence of racial discrimination, not lack of qualification. The standards they were asked to meet were standards they saw as biased in favor of whites. Many of these young men, who in previous decades might have striven to change their life patterns, to emulate more successful whites and blacks, now felt no compulsion to meet such standards.

Integration, to the extent it meant equal opportunity and treatment was accepted, but integration in a social context was viewed in a

different light by many young blacks. Their own life styles and values had more significance to them than those of others. These men were not ready to fit themselves into a behavior mold not of their own choosing. In a military environment, where there was a long-accepted pattern of what was correct conduct both on duty and off, a militant black would prove himself to be disruptive and highly visible. He could, and often did, obscure the fact that "the vast majority of black Marines that served in the Corps during the 60s and 70s were not militant and did not attack 'whitey'."³

The militants' attitude ran counter to that which had governed the service life of many of the veteran black Marine NCOs, men who had earned a respected place in the Corps based on individual achievement and performance. These men had experienced segregation at its demeaning worst, they had seen integration implemented as official policy, and they could see progress against discrimination. Imperfect though their situation might still be, these veteran black Marines had become a part of the Marine Corps "family." The outbreaks of racial tension and violence which were to mar the 60s decade in the Marine Corps would find these men ranged on the side of authority. In this respect, the veteran black Marines were in the mainstream of Marine Corps life, the militant younger blacks at times appeared to stand apart from it; neither group fully appreciated the others' background and attitudes. And yet they had a common cause, a need for full equality. One of the most striking aspects of this need, as seen by a perceptive young black officer:

... was the recognition among the Negro community that before equality could be achieved, the Negro would have to change his image; both in his mind and in the mind of the white community. This image changing process was manifested in many ways; in patient example, in significant achievement, and in angry demands and rebellion.⁴

If mutual understanding between black men