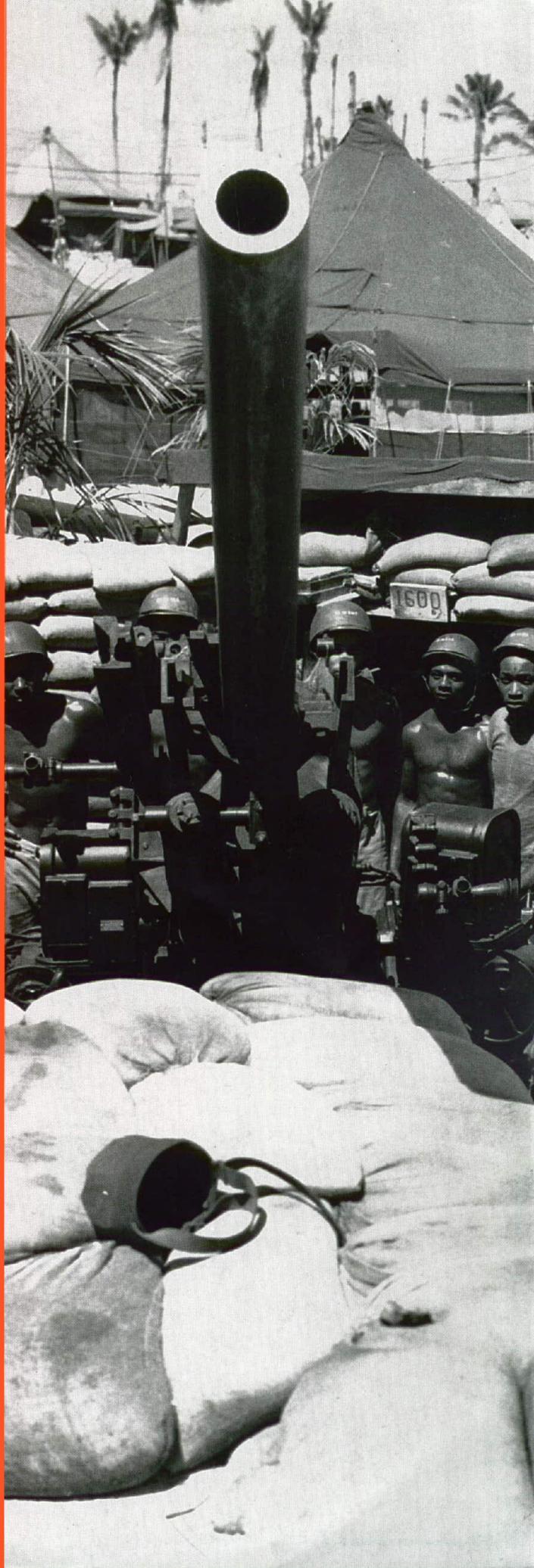


THE RIGHT TO FIGHT:
AFRICAN-AMERICAN
MARINES IN
WORLD WAR II

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WORLD WAR II
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

BY BERNARD C. NALTY





The Right to Fight: African-American Marines in World War II

by Bernard C. Nalty

A young white Marine, Edward Andrusko of Company I, 7th Marines, saw his first black Leathernecks as he crossed the beach at Peleliu in September 1944, returning to the fight after having his wounds treated at a hospital ship offshore. The African-Americans were transferring ammunition from landing craft onto trucks and delivering it to the front lines. Handling ammunition struck him as "a dangerous task at any time," but with enemy shells churning the coral sands, "it was a heroic, thankless job that few of us wanted." The black driver of one of the trucks offered a ride inland, and Andrusko accepted, taking his place in the cab, with a cargo of high explosives behind him. As the sound of battle drew nearer, he concluded that he had made "a stupid and dangerous choice of transportation," but he reached his unit safely.

Andrusko again saw the African-American Marines after his company, advancing through the island's rugged terrain, encountered concealed Japanese positions and came under fire that pinned the men down. With the company's first sergeant and another Marine, he set out to find riflemen to take the place of casualties and stretcher bearers to carry off the wounded and dead. The first Marines that Andrusko and the others found proved to be members of the

very unit he had met on the beach, and the blacks immediately volunteered to help. Andrusko's first sergeant had no idea that African-Americans were serving in the Marine Corps, so complete was the segregation of the races, but he welcomed their aid. The black Marines moved forward to the tangled ridges where Company I was fighting, carried away the casualties during the afternoon—one of the wounded compared them to "black angels sent by God"—and manned empty foxholes to help beat back a nighttime Japanese counterattack.

When Andrusko encountered the men of the ammunition company, few white Marines knew that African-Americans had been serving in the Corps for more than two years. The leadership of the Marine Corps had shown scant enthusiasm for accepting African-Americans, who had to overcome the barrier of racial prejudice as they struggled for the right to serve. But serve they did, ably and gallantly.

Basic Racial Policy

When the United States began arming against aggression by the Axis powers—Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy—the Marine Corps had a simple and inflexible policy governing African-Americans: it had not accepted them since its reestablishment in 1798 and did not want them now. In April 1941, during a meeting of the General Board of the Navy—a body roughly comparable to the War Department General Staff—the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Major General Thomas Holcomb, declared that blacks had no place in the organization he headed. "If it were a question of having a Marine Corps

of 5,000 whites or 250,000 Negroes," he said, "I would rather have the whites."

Whereas General Holcomb and the Marine Corps refused to accept African-Americans, the Navy admitted blacks in small numbers, but only to serve as messmen or stewards. The forces of change were gathering momentum, however. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, after meeting in September 1940 with a panel of black leaders, offered African-Americans better treatment and greater opportunity within the segregated armed forces in return for their support of his rearmament program and his attempt to gain an unprecedented third term in the November Presidential election. Roosevelt won that election with the help of those blacks, mainly in the cities of the North, who could still exercise the right to vote, and he did so without antagonizing the Southern segregationists in the Senate and House of Representatives whose support he needed for his anti-Nazi foreign policy.

By the spring of 1941, many black leaders felt that the time had come for the Roosevelt administration to make good its pledge to African-Americans, repaying them for their help. A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a union made up exclusively of blacks, forcefully reminded the Chief Executive of this promise, threatening a march on Washington by as many as 100,000 African-Americans who would demand their rights as citizens. Roosevelt forestalled the march by issuing in June an executive order banning racial discrimination in hiring by defense industries under contract to the federal

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

At left: Men of Montford Point clear an obstacle on the way to earning the right to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps.

African-Americans and the Marines

The estimated 5,000 blacks, free men and slaves, who served the American cause in the Revolutionary War included at least a few Continental Marines. For example, in April 1776 Captain Miles Pennington, Marine officer of the Continental brig *Reprisal*, recruited a slave, John Martin (also known as Keto), without obtaining permission from the slaveholder, William Marshall of Wilmington, Delaware. Private Martin participated in a cruise that resulted in the capture of five British merchantmen, but died in October 1777, along with all but one of his shipmates, when *Reprisal* foundered in a gale.

Two other blacks, Isaac Walker and a man known only as Orange, enlisted at Philadelphia's Tun Tavern in a company raised by Robert Mullan, the owner of the tavern, which served as a recruiting rendezvous for Marines. Captain Mullan's company, part of a battalion raised by Major Samuel Nicholas, crossed the Delaware River with George Washington on Christmas Eve 1776 and fought the British at Princeton. The wartime contributions of the black Continental Marines, and the other blacks who served on land or at sea, went unrewarded, for the armed forces of the independent United States sought to exclude African-Americans.

For a time, a militia backed by a small regular Army – both made up exclusively of whites – seemed force enough

to defend the nation, but tensions between the United States and France resulted in the building of a fleet to replace the disbanded Continental Navy. In 1798, when the time arrived to recruit crews for the new warships, the Navy banned "Negroes or Mulattoes," grouping them with "Persons whose Characters are Suspicious." The Commandant of the reestablished Marine Corps, Lieutenant Colonel William Ward Burrows, followed the Navy's example and barred African-Americans from enlisting, although black drummers and fifers might provide music to attract potential recruits.

The Marine Corps maintained this racial exclusiveness until World War II. Its small size enabled the Corps to recruit enough whites to fill its ranks, but other considerations may also have helped shape racial policy. Marines maintained order on shipboard and at naval installations, and the idea of blacks exercising authority over white sailors would have shocked a racially conscious America. The Marine Corps, moreover, had a sizable proportion of Southern officers, products of a society that had held black slaves. Not even the Northern victory in the Civil War, which enforced emancipation, could bring the races together in the former Confederacy. Jim Crow, the personification of racial segregation, rapidly imposed his grip on the entire nation, assuming the force of law in 1896 when the Supreme Court decided *Plessy v. Ferguson* and, in effect, isolated blacks from white society.

government and establishing the Fair Employment Practices Commission to monitor compliance. He also increased pressure on the armed forces to provide blacks better treatment and broader opportunities as he had pledged during the previous autumn.

The naval establishment had been slow to carry out the President's wishes. As late as the summer of 1941, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox continued to oppose the recruiting of African-Americans, except as stewards in officers' messes. He insisted that the restrictions on opportunities actually benefited blacks, for in other specialties they would have to compete on equal terms with whites and could not possibly succeed. Since the President, an Assistant Secretary of the Navy during World War I, took a personal interest in the Navy and Marine Corps, Knox realized these services would have to lower their racial barriers and

reluctantly suggested recruiting 5,000 blacks for general service. In January 1942, while the General Board considered this proposal and reflected on the presidential pressure behind it, General Holcomb voiced his deeply felt misgivings. Although further opposition could only be futile, the Commandant complained that those blacks seeking to enlist in the Marine Corps were "trying to break into a club that doesn't want them." The "negro race," he argued, "has every opportunity now to satisfy its aspirations for combat in the Army," which had maintained four regular regiments of black soldiers since shortly after the Civil War.

Roosevelt tried to avoid antagonizing a reluctant Navy, offering assurance that it need not "go all the way at one fell swoop" and racially integrate the general service. He kept pushing, however, for greater opportunities for blacks within the bounds

of segregation, and the Navy could not defy the Commander in Chief. Secretary Knox on 7 April 1942 advised the uniformed leaders of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard (a component of the wartime Navy) that they would have to accept African-Americans for general service. Some six weeks later, the Navy Department publicly announced that the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard would enlist about 1,000 African-Americans each month, beginning 1 June, and that the Marines would organize a racially segregated 900-man defense battalion, training the blacks recruited for it from the beginning of boot camp onward.

Change Comes to the Marine Corps

On 25 May 1942 the Commandant of the Marine Corps issued formal instructions to begin on 1 June to



Painting by Col Charles H. Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret.)

A black American served with the Marines when Gen George Washington fought the Battle of Princeton in January 1777.

recruit qualified "colored male citizens of the United States between the ages of 17 and 29, inclusive, for service in a combat organization." Given the nature of American society in 1942, that organization would be racially segregated, the blacks in the ranks being commanded by whites. Those black volunteers whom the Marine Corps accepted would, as most wartime white recruits, enter the reserve for the duration of the war plus six months, but their active duty would be delayed until the completion of a segregated training camp, scheduled for 25 July. Some of the new recruits would serve as specialists, everything from cooks to clerks, who would see to the day-to-day operation of a racially exclusive training camp.

The task of forming and training even one battalion of African-Americans seemed a formidable challenge, for it involved giving raw recruits their basic skills, further honing the fighting edge, and finally creating a combat team. General Ray A. Robinson, in 1942 a colonel in

charge of the Personnel Section, Division of Plans and Policies, at Marine Corps headquarters, confessed during an interview in 1968 that the admission of blacks "just scared us to death." Although the draft did not become the normal source of recruits for all the services until December 1942, and the first draftees did not enter the Marine Corps until January 1943, Robinson sought help from the Selective Service System, where a black officer of the Army Reserve, Lieutenant Colonel Campbell C. Johnson, had been called to active duty as an administrator. Johnson indicated that he would do what he could and joked about passing the word that Marines die young, so that only those African-Americans willing to risk their lives would join. Robinson acknowledged that the Corps "got some awfully good Negroes" over the years and believed that Johnson was at least partly responsible.

Despite Johnson's interest in the black Marines, the Corps had to rely throughout 1942 on volunteers, and

recruiting proved sluggish. By mid-June, only 63 African-Americans had enlisted and recruiters were becoming desperate, since the training camp for blacks neared completion. This lack of immediate results reflected the fact that the Marine Corps, after excluding African-Americans since the American Revolution, was attempting to sign up recruits in a black community that had no tradition of service as Leathernecks. Recruiters found it especially difficult to sign up the truck drivers, cooks, and typists to support the battalion, even though black educators assured the Marine Corps that an adequate pool of such specialists existed. When a recruiter in Boston told Obie Hall that he could enter the Marine Corps immediately if he had the right specialty, Hall said he was a truck driver. Although he "no more could drive a truck than the man in the moon," he wanted to go and had no hope of passing himself off as a cook or typist.

The number of African-Americans who shared Hall's enthusiasm slow-

ly increased. Some of those who joined up looked on serving in the Marine Corps as an opportunity denied blacks for a century and a half. Others saw this service as a personal challenge. By the end of September, about half of the 1,200 recruits needed to man the battalion and render administrative, housekeeping, and transportation support had enlisted. The Presidential decision on 1 December 1942 to make the Selective Service System the normal source of recruits for all the services ensured that, beginning in January 1943, 1,000 African-Americans would enter the Marine Corps each month. This influx resulted from the fact that the draft law prohibited racial discrimination in its administration; in practical terms, this meant that the Army and Navy could establish quotas for black recruits but not arbitrarily exclude them.

While preparing to absorb the African-Americans provided by the

Selective Service System, the Marine Corps reaffirmed its commitment to racial segregation, but it proposed to carry out this policy without channeling blacks into meaningless assignments that had little to do with winning the war. Lacking recent experience with blacks, the Marines sought to profit from the example of the Army, which avoided placing blacks in charge of whites. Applying this lesson, General Holcomb in March 1943 issued Letter of Instruction 421, which declared it "essential that in no case shall there be colored noncommissioned officers senior to white men in the same unit, and desirable that few, if any, be of the same rank." LOI 421 was a classified document and did not become public during the war, but the African-American Marine who could not earn promotion because a white noncommissioned officer blocked his path immediately felt its impact. To remove this racial roadblock while

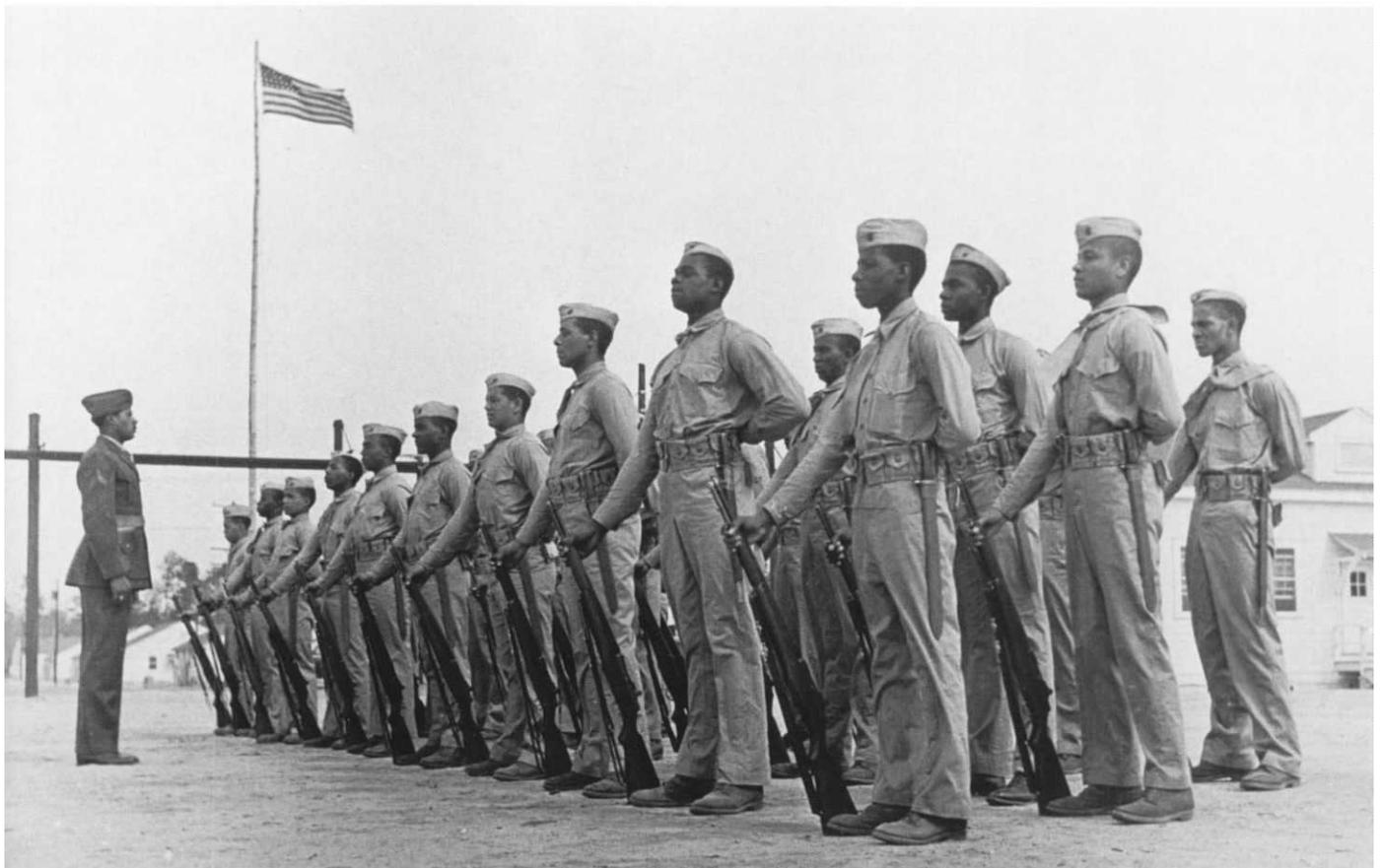
adhering to the policy of segregation, white noncommissioned officers would be removed as promptly and completely as feasible from the newly organized black units, forcing the Marine Corps to create in a matter of months a fully functioning cadre of black sergeants and corporals.

At best, the Commandant had mixed feelings about the black recruits whom the Roosevelt administration had forced on him. "All Marines," he proclaimed, "are entitled to the same rights and privileges under Navy Regulations," but even as he announced this idealistic principle, he felt compelled to remind the African-Americans that they should "conduct themselves with propriety and become a real credit to the Corps" and to require periodic reports on their status. The black Marines clearly faced a struggle for acceptance within the Corps before they got the opportunity to fight the Japanese.

Cpl Edgar R. Huff drills a platoon of recruits at the Montford Point Camp. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in June 1942.

Huff became a legend among the Marines who were trained here. He retired in 1972 as a sergeant major at New River.

National Archives Photo 127-N-5337



Face-to-Face with Segregation

Service in the Marine Corps brought men like Obie Hall, who enlisted from the cities of the North where race relations were somewhat relaxed, into contact with segregation at its harshest. Hall received a sleeping-car ticket for the rail journey from Boston to the training site in North Carolina, and all went well until he reached Washington, D.C., where he was ordered out of his assigned berth. A porter, also an African-American, explained that Hall had reached the "black line" south of which rail travel was segregated. The porter, in defiance of the law and social custom of that time, found an empty compartment that Hall occupied for the rest of the trip. Some 18 months later, John R. Griffin of Chicago did not find a sympathetic porter willing to break the rules; at Washington he had to transfer to a Jim Crow car, "hot, dirty, crowded (with babies crying and old men drinking and [black] Marines discussing the fun they had on leave)."

Segregation prevailed at the Marine Barracks, New River, North Carolina – soon redesignated Camp Lejeune – where the African-Americans would train, and in the nearby town of Jacksonville. For the black recruits, the Marine Corps established a separate cantonment, the Montford Point Camp, in westernmost Camp Lejeune. At least one Marine veteran, Lieutenant General James L. Underhill, suggested in retrospect that the Corps made a mistake in pushing them "off to one corner," for doing so reinforced the belief, accurate though it was, that blacks were not truly welcome. The Marine Corps, Underhill believed, "should have dressed them up in blue uniforms and put them behind a band and marched them down Fifth Avenue" to show their pride in being Marines and their acceptance by the Corps. At the time, as Underhill surely realized, neither the Marine Corps



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 5344
Sgt Gilbert H. "Hashmark" Johnson, a veteran of service in both the Army and Navy, glares at the boots in his recruit platoon. He became a Marine in 1942.

nor much of American society was ready for such a gesture of racial amity.

The Montford Point Camp consisted at first of a headquarters building, a chapel, two warehouses, a mess hall, a dispensary, a steam generating plant, a motor pool, quarters and recreational facilities for the white enlisted men who initially staffed the operation, a barber shop, and 120 green-painted prefabricated huts, each capable of accommodating 16 recruits, though twice that number were sometimes jammed into them, pending the completion of new barracks. The original camp also boasted a snack bar that dispensed beer, a small club for the white officers, and a theater, one wing of which was converted into a library. As the black Marines cleared the land around the camp, they encountered clouds of mosquitoes, a variety of snakes, and the tracks of an occasional bear, if not the animal itself. To the north of the original site, across a creek, lay Camp Knox, occupied during the Great Depression of the 1930s by a contingent of the Civilian Conservation Corps, an agency that put jobless young men to work, under military supervision, on public improvements and recla-

mation projects. As the number of African-American Marines increased, they spilled over into the old CCC camp.

Railroad tracks divided white residents from black in segregated Jacksonville. Suddenly, hundreds of African-American Marines on liberty appeared on the white side of the tracks, looking for entertainment. At first, white businessmen reacted to this sight by bolting their doors. Even the bus depot shut down until someone realized that the liberty parties might well find other North Carolina towns like New Bern or Wilmington more attractive than Jacksonville, and the ticket agents went back to work.

Getting out of Jacksonville became easier, but returning to camp from the town proved difficult on a Jim Crow bus line. Drivers gave priority to white passengers, as state law required, and restricted black passengers to the rear of the bus, unless whites needed the space. Since the two races formed separate lines at the bus stop, drivers tended to take only whites on board and leave the black Marines standing there as the deadline for returning to Montford Point drew nearer. When this happened, angry black Marines, at the risk of

The 'Great White Father'

Colonel Samuel A. Woods, Jr., launched the training program for black Marines at Montford (originally Mumford) Point. At this time, based on the Army's practices, the Marine Corps believed that officers born in the South were uniquely suited to commanding African-Americans, and the colonel fit the pattern, since he hailed from South Carolina. Born at Arlington, he graduated from The Citadel, South Carolina's military college, and in 1906 accepted a commission in the Corps. He served in Haiti and Cuba but arrived in France as World War I was ending. Afterward he saw duty in the Dominican

Republic and China, attended the Naval War College, and headed the Marine Corps correspondence schools at the Marine Barracks, Quantico, Virginia.

The colonel's calmness and fairness earned him the respect of the blacks he commanded. He cultivated a paternalistic relationship with his men and emerged, according to one African-American veteran of the Montford Point Camp, as "the Great White Father of everybody," trying to ease the impact of segregation on the morale of his troops, though he accepted the separation of the races, and insisting that the black Marines exhibit self-pride and competence.



National Archives Photo 127-N-9511
Col Samuel A. Woods, Jr., established the Montford Point Camp and also served as the first commanding officer of the 51st Defense Battalion (Composite).

violence from the local police, might commandeer a bus, remove the driver, and take it to the gate nearest Jacksonville, where the transit company could retrieve it on the next morning. The white officer in command at Montford Point, Colonel Samuel A. Woods, Jr., took steps to ensure that the black Marines could return safely to Montford Point without risking arrest. He sent his battalion's trucks into town to pick up the men and assigned white non-commissioned officers from the staff at Montford Point to the military police patrols that kept order in the town. The NCOs detailed by Colonel Woods helped deter local authorities from making arbitrary arrests of black Marines. As black non-commissioned officers became available, one of them accompanied each patrol, though unarmed and without authority to arrest or detain white Marines.

Although race also affected relationships among Marines, especially during the early months of the Montford Point Camp, instances of the racial harassment of black Marines became increasingly less frequent. The improved conditions resulted in part from Montford Point's isolation, but it also reflected the efforts of the African-Americans to impress their

white fellow Marines. Obie Hall recalled that the men of Montford Point tried to look their sharpest, especially when in the presence of white Marines. "They really put that chest out," he said. Pride in appearance had beneficial effects, for one white Marine remarked that, although he only saw blacks when they were on liberty because of the segregation on Camp Lejeune, "they always looked sharp." The white military police remained unimpressed, however. They tended to share the racial attitudes of their civilian counterparts, and the persistent hostility generated intense resentment among the African-American Marines.

Knowledge that they would have to overcome racism to gain the right to serve created a feeling of solidarity among black Marines. At times, they could invoke this unity to right a wrong, as happened after the officer of the day at Montford Point, angered by what he considered raucous behavior during a comedy being shown at the camp movie theater, had the black audience take their buckets—these utilitarian possessions at the time were serving as seats—and put them over their heads. The recently appointed black drill instructors reacted by ordering their Marines to clean the barracks

instead of attending a show being staged especially for them by black performers. When Colonel Woods heard of the impromptu field day, he investigated, learned of the ill-considered action by the officer of the day, and made sure the African-Americans attended the performance.

One incident painfully reminded the African-Americans of their second-class status in the Marine Corps, indeed throughout a Jim Crow society. A boxing show staged at the Montford Point Camp attracted a distinguished guest, Major General Henry L. Larsen, who had taken command of Camp Lejeune after returning from the South Pacific. During an informal talk, he made what he considered a humorous remark, but his audience interpreted it as an insult. According to one of the black Marines who was there, the general said something to the effect that when he returned from overseas he had seen women Marines and dog Marines, but when he saw "you people wearing our uniform," he knew there was a war on. The off-hand comment may have served, however, to bring the men of Montford Point even closer together.

Oddly enough, a white officer came the closest to capturing the iso-

lation felt by blacks in segregated North Carolina. Robert W. Troup, in peacetime a musician and composer who had played alongside black performers, accepted a wartime commission and reported to Montford Point, where he made a lasting impression. One of the African-American Marines, Gilbert H. Johnson, considered him a "topnotch musician, a very decent sort of officer," and another, Obie Hall, described him as "the sharpest cat I've ever seen in my life." Bobby Troup's song "Jacksonville," the unofficial anthem of men of Montford Point, included the heartfelt plea:

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.

While assigned to the 51st Defense Battalion (Composite), the African-American Bobby Troup, a musician turned wartime Marine Corps officer, staged shows at Montford Point using talent such as Private Finis Henderson, a professional singer and dancer before enlisting, and Curtis Institute graduate Sgt Joe Wilder, not shown.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 6797



American defense battalion authorized in 1942, Troup doubled as recreation officer, organizing baseball and basketball teams, arranging the construction of sports facilities, and staging shows using talent available at Montford Point. Perhaps the most popular performer was Finis Henderson, a private who had sung and tap-danced in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer films. As the star of one of Troup's shows, Henderson sang "Jacksonville" while stage hands threw bits of brown paper into the air flow from a pair of electric fans to simulate the dust blowing down the street of that much-despised town. In December 1944, Troup took command of the black 6th Depot Company—the second unit with that designation—which deployed to Saipan and handled supplies at the base there.

Starting from Scratch

The training program at Montford Point, which signaled the first appearance of blacks in Marine uni-

versity, was a success. It was staged by Bobby Troup, a musician turned wartime Marine Corps officer, using talent such as Private Finis Henderson, a professional singer and dancer before enlisting, and Curtis Institute graduate Sgt Joe Wilder, not shown.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 6797

forms since the Revolutionary War, began with boot camp and had as its ultimate objective the creation of a composite defense battalion. This combat unit would be racially segregated, commanded by white officers, and with an initial complement of white noncommissioned officers, who would serve only until black replacements became available. Colonel Woods had to start from scratch, with no cadre of experienced African-Americans except for a handful with prior service in the Army or Navy. When boot training began, the colonel commanded both the camp itself and the 51st Defense Battalion (Composite) being formed there. Lieutenant Colonel Theodore A. Holdahl—an enlisted veteran of World War I who served as an officer in the Far East and Central America—had charge of recruit training. Some two dozen white officers, a number of them recently commissioned second lieutenants like Bobby Troup, and 90 white enlisted Marines, directed the training. The enlisted men formed the Special Enlisted Staff, which initially carried out assignments that varied from clerk or typist to drill instructor. The Marine Corps screened the Special Enlisted Staff to exclude anyone opposed to the presence of blacks in the ranks. One of the Montford Point Marines suggested that, in the normal pressures of boot camp, a breakdown in the screening process could have doomed the program, for racial hostility would have reinforced the usual harassment visited on every recruit, white or black. "We would all have left the first week," he joked. "Some of us, probably, the first night."

In keeping with Marine Corps policy, Woods and Holdahl had to replace the whites of the Special Enlisted Staff with black noncommissioned officers as rapidly as possible. The command structure at Montford Point tried to identify the best of the African-American recruits and place



These Marines of the first platoon to enter recruit training at Montford Point were promoted to private first class a month before they completed boot camp and became assistant drill instructors. From left are Mortimer A. Cox; Arnold R. Bostick; Edgar R. Davis, Jr.; Gilbert H. "Hashmark" Johnson and Edgar R. Huff (their drill instructors); and Charles E. Allen.

them on a fast track to positions of responsibility in boot camp and in the battalion itself. The general classification test, administered as a part of the initial processing, grouped those who took the test into five categories, with the highest scores in Category I, and afforded one tool for predicting the ability of the new Marines. Unfortunately, those black Marines who administered the test and interpreted the results were themselves on-the-job trainees. Consequently, the test results could at times prove misleading, with college graduates sometimes showing up in Categories IV or even V. Drill instructors, initially whites with varying experience in the Marine Corps, had to rely on their own powers of observation to determine which of the African-American recruits had the aptitude to exercise effective leadership and master the necessary technology. Formal tests, written or

oral, provided a final winnowing of the candidates. The first promotions, to private first class, took place early in November 1942, a month before the men selected to sew on their single stripe had completed boot camp.

The problem of classifying recruits demonstrated that the Montford Point Camp required skilled administrators. Creating an administrative infrastructure proved difficult, for the comparatively few volunteers who stepped forward in the summer and fall of 1942 included few clerks and typists. Enough African-American recruits would have to learn the mysteries of Marine Corps administration to fill the necessary billets, but racial segregation prevented them from taking courses alongside whites. For the present, white instructors would teach administrative subjects at Montford Point, until black Marines could master the skills and pass

them along. When tackling the more complex subjects, like optical fire control or radar, the African-Americans attended courses offered by the Army at nearby Camp Davis, North Carolina, and elsewhere.

Lacking a cadre of black veterans, the Marine Corps had to advance the best of the African-American recruits into the ranks of noncommissioned officers so as to achieve the goal of a segregated defense battalion commanded by white officers but with no white enlisted men in any capacity. The promotion of black Marines depended on ability, as revealed by the initial classification tests, ratings from superiors, the results of formal examinations, and the existence of vacancies that would not violate policy by placing a black Marine in charge of whites. As the number of African-American Marines increased and training activity accelerated, some of the recently promoted pri-

Two of Those Who Succeeded

Two of the black Marines who overcame every challenge, Edgar R. Huff and Gilbert H. Johnson, became legends among the men of Montford Point. Both grew up in Alabama, and ultimately would marry twin sisters, but their military backgrounds could not have been more different. Huff's service began when he joined the Marine Corps, but Johnson had served in both the Army and Navy before he reported to Montford Point.

Gilbert H. Johnson earned the nickname "Hashmark" because he wore on the sleeve of his Marine Corps uniform three of the diagonal stripes, called hashmarks, indicating successful previous enlistments. Born in Mt. Hebron, Alabama, in 1905, he joined the Army in 1923 and served two three-year hitches with a black regiment, the 25th Infantry. In 1933, he enlisted in the Naval Reserve as a mess attendant, serving on active duty in officers' messes at various installations in Texas. He entered the regular Navy in May 1941 and had become a steward second class by 1942 when he heard that the Marine Corps was recruiting African-Americans.

With infantry experience ranging from company clerk to mortar gunner and squad leader, Johnson felt he was ideally suited to become a Marine. As regulations required, he applied to the Secretary of the Navy, via the Commandant of the Marine Corps, for a discharge from the Navy in order to join the Marines. He received the necessary permission and reported to Montford Point on 14 November 1942, still wearing his steward's uniform.

As he anticipated, he possessed vitally needed skills that resulted in his being chosen as an assistant drill instructor and later a drill instructor. He ended up supervising the very platoon in which he had started his training. Looking back on his days as a DI, Johnson conceded that he was something of an "ogre" on the drill field. "I was a stern instructor," he said, "but I was fair." He sought, with unswerving dedication, to produce "in a few weeks, and at most a few months, a type of Marine fully qualified in every respect to wear that much cherished Globe and Anchor." In January 1945, he became sergeant major of the Montford Point Camp and in June of that year joined the 52d Defense Battalion on Guam, also as sergeant major, remain-

ing in that assignment until the unit disbanded in 1946.

His subsequent career included service during the Korean War. He retired in 1955 after completing a tour of duty as First Sergeant, Headquarters and Service Company, 3d Marines, 3d Marine Division. He died in 1972. Two years afterward, the Marine Corps paid tribute to his accomplishments by redesignating the Montford Point Camp as Camp Gilbert H. Johnson.

Edgar R. Huff enlisted in the Marine Corps in June 1942 and underwent training at the new Montford Point Camp. "I wanted to be a Marine," he said years later, "because I had always heard that the Marine Corps was the toughest outfit going, and I felt I was the toughest going, so I wanted to be a member of the best organization." His toughness and physical strength had served him well while a crane rigger for the Republic Steel Company in Alabama City, near his home town of Gadsden, Alabama.

Huff reported for duty at a time when the Montford Point operation desperately needed forceful and intelligent African-Americans, with or without previous military experience, to take over from the white noncommissioned officers of the Special Enlisted Staff. Since he possessed the very qualities that the Marine Corps was seeking, he attended a drill instructor's course, served briefly as an assistant to two white drill instructors, took over a platoon of his own, and soon assumed responsibility for all the DIs at Montford Point. He made platoon sergeant in September 1943, gunnery sergeant in November of that year, and in June 1944 became first sergeant of a malaria control detachment at Montford Point. He went overseas six months later as the first sergeant of the 5th Depot Company—the second wartime unit with that designation—served on Saipan, saw combat on Okinawa, and took part in the occupation of North China.

Discharged from the Marine Corps when the war ended, he spent a few months as a civilian and then reenlisted. He saw service in the Korean War and the Vietnam War. During his second tour of duty in Vietnam, he was Sergeant Major, III Marine Amphibious Force, the principal Marine Corps command in Southeast Asia. He retired in 1972 while Sergeant Major, Marine Corps Air Station, New River, North Carolina, and died in May 1994.

Gilbert H. "Hashmark" Johnson
Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 5344

Edgar R. Huff





National Archives Photo 127-N-5334

During a demonstration while training at Montford Point, Cpl Arvin L. "Tony" Ghazlo, instructor in unarmed combat, disarms his assistant, PFC Ernest Jones.

vates first class, corporals, and sergeants became assistant drill instructors at the Montford Point boot camp, replaced the white drill instructors, or joined the defense battalion when it began taking shape. The rapid expansion of the noncommissioned ranks thrust many of the newly promoted black Marines into sink-or-swim assignments in which they not only kept their heads above water but made rapid progress against the current.

A few of the black volunteers besides Gilbert Johnson had previous military experience; others had special ability or the potential for leadership. John T. Pridgen, for instance, had served in the 10th Cavalry before the war, and George A. Jackson had been an officer in the peacetime Army reserve. At a time when few whites and fewer blacks held degrees, the Montford Point Marines included several college graduates, among them Charles F. Anderson and Charles W. Simmons. The talents of Arvin L. "Tony" Ghazlo proved as valuable as they were rare, for as a civilian he had given lessons in jujitsu. With the help of another black

Marine, Ernest "Judo" Jones, Ghazlo taught unarmed combat at Montford Point. Men like these replaced members of the Special Enlisted Staff in the training process, a transition all but completed by the end of April 1943, and became noncommissioned officers in the 51st Defense Battalion and the other units formed from the tide of draftees.

Thanks to the use of the Selective Service System as the normal source of recruits, the nature of the program at Montford Point was changing. A single defense battalion could not absorb the influx of blacks into the Marine Corps. Consequently, Secretary of the Navy Knox authorized a Marine Corps Messman Branch and the first of 63 combat support companies — either depot or ammunition units — as well as a second defense battalion, the 52d. An expansion of the Montford Point Camp began, as the Marine Corps prepared to house another thousand blacks there. The Headquarters and Service Company, Montford Point Camp, came into existence on 11 March 1943, and at the same time, the 51st Defense Battalion (Composite) provided the

nucleus for the Headquarters Company, Recruit Depot Battalion. Colonel Woods retained command of the camp, entrusting the defense battalion to Lieutenant Colonel W. Bayard Onley, a graduate of the Naval Academy whose most recent assignment had been Regimental Executive Officer, 23d Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Holdahl continued to exercise control over boot training as commander of the new recruit battalion. On 1 April, Captain Albert O. Madden, a veteran of World War I who, as a civilian, had operated restaurants in Albany, New York, took command of the new Messman Branch Battalion; on the 13th, when the Messman Branch became the Stewards' Branch, the name of Madden's battalion changed to reflect the redesignation. The growth of the Montford Point operation required additional housekeeping support, much of it obtained from the rifle company of the 51st Defense Battalion, after a modified table of organization disbanded the infantry unit in the summer of 1943.

Building the 51st Defense Battalion

The proliferation of African-American units and the expansion of activity at Montford Point interfered with the organization and training of the 51st Defense Battalion (Composite) by making demands on the pool of black noncommissioned officers that Woods, Holdahl, and the shrinking Special Enlisted Staff had assembled. The first, and for a time the only, Marine Corps combat unit to be manned by blacks found itself in competition with another defense battalion, the new combat support outfits (depot and ammunition companies), the Stewards' Branch, and, as before, the recruit training function. So thinly spread was the African-American enlisted leadership that the same individuals might serve in a succession of units. "Hashmark" Johnson, a DI in boot camp, ended

The Stewards' Branch

In organizing the Stewards' Branch, the Marine Corps followed the example of the Navy, which had begun before World War I to segregate the enlisted force by channeling blacks away from combat or technical specialties and making them stewards or mess attendants. Once Captain Madden's formal courses began producing enough graduates, the Stewards' Branch provided cooks and attendants for officers' messes in large-unit headquarters. Combat experience would prove that duty in the Stewards' Branch could be as dangerous as any other assignment open to blacks. On Saipan, for example, two members of the branch suffered wounds when the enemy shelled the headquarters of the 2d Marine Division. On Okinawa, where stewards routinely volunteered as stretcher bearers, Steward 2d Class Warren N. McGrew, Jr., was killed and seven others sustained wounds, one of them, Steward's Assistant 1st Class Joe N. Bryant, being wounded twice.

The Stewards' Branch did not include the cooks and bakers in black units. Segregation required that African-Americans take over these specialties, beginning at the Montford Point Camp. In January 1943, Jerome D. Alcorn, Otto Cherry, and Robert T. Davis became the first to cross the divide between assistant cook (at the time the equivalent of a corporal) and field cook (sergeant).

up with the 52d Defense Battalion. Similarly, Edgar Huff, also a DI, moved on to other assignments, including first sergeant of one of the combat service support companies.

The 51st had attained only half its authorized strength on 21 April, when a new commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Floyd A. Stephenson, took over from Lieutenant Colonel Onley. Stephenson, in command of a defense battalion at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked, later declared that he "had no brief for the Negro program in the Marine Corps," since he hailed from Texas, "where matters relating to Negroes are normally given the closest critical scrutiny," a euphemistic description of Jim Crow. He was, in short, the product of a segregated society, but despite his background, he tackled his new assignment with enthusiasm and skill. African-Americans, he soon discovered, could learn to perform all the duties required in a defense battalion.

By the end of 1942, the nature of the defense battalion had begun changing. Already the Marine Corps had stricken light tanks from the table of organization and equipment, and, as close combat became increas-

ingly less likely, the rifle company and the pack howitzers followed the armor into oblivion. Emphasis shifted from repulsing amphibious landings to defending against Japanese air strikes and hit-and-run raids by warships. In June 1943, the qualifier "Composite" disappeared from the designation of the 51st Defense Battalion, the 155mm battery became a group, and the machine gun unit evolved into the Special Weapons Group, with 20mm and 40mm weapons, as well as machine guns. A month later, the 155mm Group became the Seacoast Artillery Group, and the 90mm outfit, with its searchlights, the Antiaircraft Artillery Group. No further changes took place before the battalion went overseas.

As this evolution in organization and weaponry began, Stephenson set to work building a segregated battalion with the African-American Marines available to him. They had undergone classification testing at Montford Point and been grouped according to their scores. Normally men in Category IV would at best attain the rank of corporal, whereas those in Categories III through I generally had the aptitude for higher

rank, though no black could aspire to officer training. Since classification scores tended to be fallible, Stephenson and his officers had to rely on instruction, observation, and evaluation as they tried to create a cadre of black noncommissioned officers in nine months or less.

Each group within the battalion — at the time 155mm artillery, 90mm antiaircraft artillery, and special weapons — maintained standing examination boards, which included the group commander. The officers and noncommissioned officers recommended candidates for promotion, who then appeared before the group's examining board. The first test in this series, for promotion to private first class, was a written examination usually administered during or shortly after boot camp, but the others, given during unit training, consisted of 25 to 30 questions answered orally. The names of those who survived the screening went to the battalion commander who matched candidates with openings. "Many qualified men waited from month to month," Stephenson recalled, although in six or eight instances over perhaps nine months "an especially meritorious, mature man was advanced two grades on successive days to place especially talented leaders in positions of responsibility." Just as "Hashmark" Johnson and Edgar Huff had advanced rapidly within the recruit training operation, Obie Hall became a platoon sergeant within six months of joining the battalion.

The tempo of training picked up throughout the summer and fall of 1943, as African-American noncommissioned officers replaced more of the white enlisted men who had taught them to handle weapons and lead men in combat. On 20 August, the 51st Defense Battalion suffered its first fatality. During a disembarkation exercise, while the Marines of the 155mm Artillery Group scrambled down a net draped over a



Photo courtesy of Edgar R. Huff

The creation of a cadre of African-American noncommissioned officers brought rapid promotion to those who had the abilities, as Edgar Huff, shown here as a first sergeant, the Marine

Corps needed. Some especially meritorious mature men were advanced two grades on successive days to place talented leaders in positions of responsibility in field organizations.

wooden structure representing the side of a transport, Corporal Gilbert Fraser, Jr., slipped, fell into a landing craft in the water below, and suffered injuries that claimed his life. In memory of the 30-year-old graduate of Virginia Union College, the road leading from Montford Point Camp to the artillery range became Fraser Road.

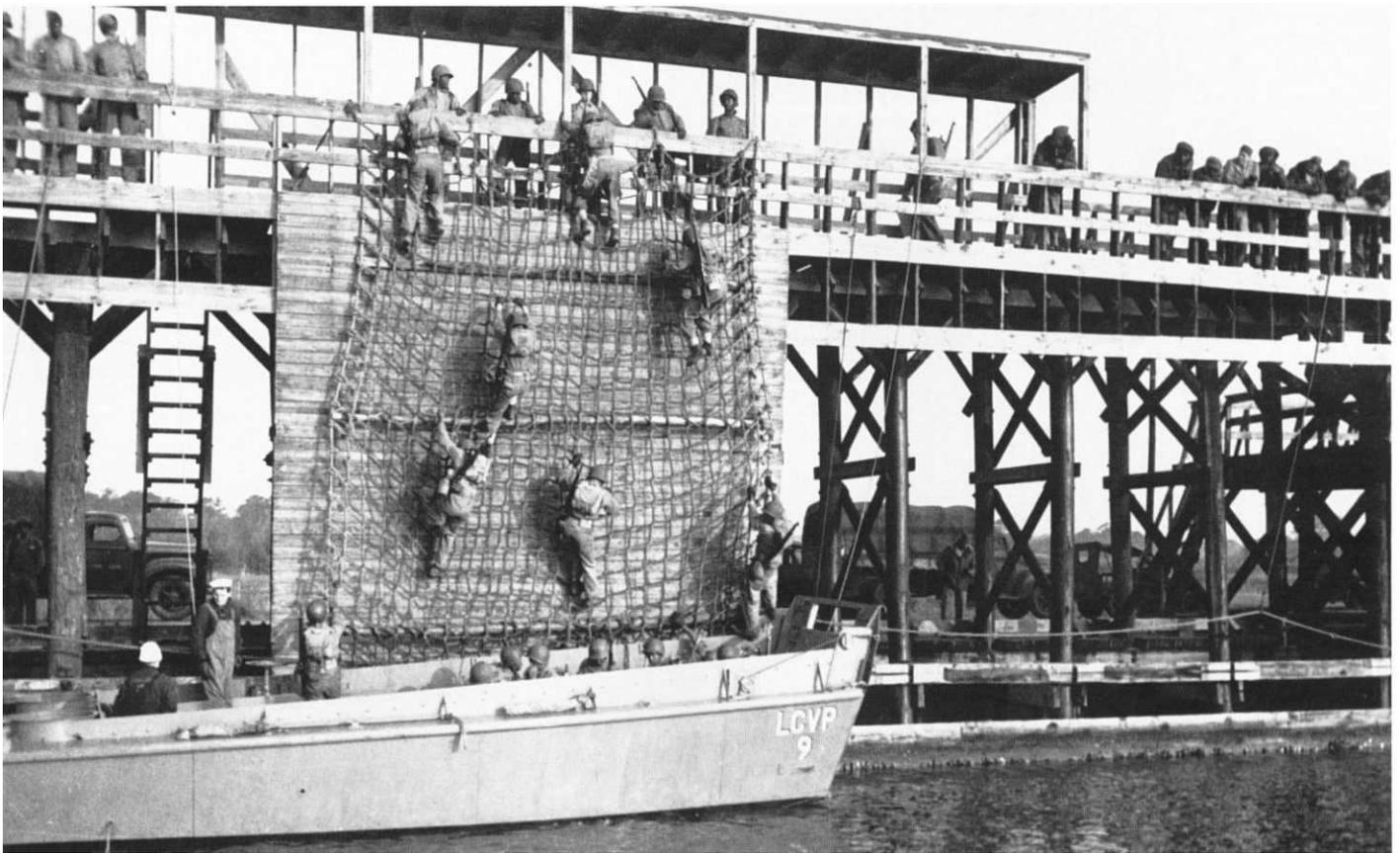
Although the men of the 51st Defense Battalion had to assume the responsibilities of squad leaders and platoon sergeants even as they learned to care for and fire the battalion's weapons, the black Marines met this challenge, as they demonstrated in November 1943. During firing exercises—while Secretary of the Navy Knox, General Holcomb, and Colonel Johnson of the Selective Service System watched—an African-American crew opened fire with a 90mm gun at a sleeve target being towed overhead and hit it within just 60 seconds. Lieutenant Colonel Stephenson, listening for the Com-

mandant's reaction, heard him say "I think they're ready now." Few other crews in the 51st could match this performance, and a number of them clearly needed further training, as some of their officers warned at the time. The four days of firing at the end of November could not be repeated, however, for the unit would depart sooner than originally planned on the first leg of a journey to the Pacific.

Where in the Pacific area would that journey end? Marine Major General Charles F. B. Price, in command of American forces in Samoa, had already warned against sending the African-Americans there. He based his opinion on his interpretation of the science of genetics. The light-skinned Polynesians, whom he considered "primitively romantic" by nature, had mingled freely with whites to produce "a very high class half caste," and liaisons with Chinese had resulted in "a very desirable type" of offspring. The arrival of a battal-

ion of black Marines, however, would "infuse enough Negro blood into the population to make the island predominately Negro" and produce what Price considered "a very undesirable citizen." Better, the general suggested, to send the 51st Defense Battalion to a region populated by Melanesians, where the "higher type of intelligence" among the African-Americans would not only "cause no racial strain" but also "actually raise the level of physical and mental standards" among the black islanders. After the general forwarded his recommendation to Marine Corps headquarters, though not necessarily because of his reasoning, two black depot companies that arrived in Samoa during October 1943 were promptly sent elsewhere.

Whatever its ultimate destination, the 51st Defense Battalion started off to war early in January 1944, and by the 19th, most of the unit—less 400 men transferred to the newly organized 52d Defense Battalion—and



National Archives Photo 127-N-9007

A fall during an exercise comparable to this killed Cpl Gilbert Fraser, Jr., the first fatality suffered by the Montford Point Marines.

the bulk of its gear were moving by rail toward San Diego. On that day, while Stephenson supervised the loading of the last of the 175 freight cars assigned to move the unit's equipment, a few of the black Marines waiting to board a troop train began celebrating their imminent departure by downing a few beers too many at the Montford Point snack bar, which lived up to the nickname of "slop chute," universally applied to such facilities. The military police, all of them white, cut off the supply of beer by closing the place and forcing the blacks to leave. Once outside, the men of the battalion milled about and began throwing rocks and shattering the windows of the snack bar. Again the military police intervened, one of them firing shots into the air to disperse the unruly crowd. Some of the black Marines fled into the nearby theater, which the military police promptly shut down. At this point, someone fired 15 or 20 shots into the air from the vicinity of a footbridge linking

the Montford Point Camp with Camp Knox, the old CCC facility, where those members of the 51st still in the area had their quarters. A stray bullet wounded a drill instructor,

Corporal Rolland W. Curtiss, who was leading his platoon on a night march. Despite the injury and a momentary panic among his recruits, the corporal brought his men safely

A 90mm gun crew practices loading at Montford Point in preparation for its deployment overseas to the Pacific and eventual combat operations in the war.





National Archives Photo 127-N-9507

A gun crew of the 51st Defense Battalion trains for overseas deployment.

back to their barracks. Although one rifle assigned to the battalion showed signs of firing and another appeared to have been cleaned with hair oil, perhaps to disguise recent use, neither could be linked to a specific Marine. Records proved to be in disarray, with serial numbers copied incorrectly and individuals in possession of weapons other than the ones they were supposed to have. The breakdown of accountability impeded a hurried investigation by Stephenson and four of his officers and prevented them from determining who had fired the shots.

The mix-up in weapons resulted from the confusion of the move and

the inexperience of recently promoted junior noncommissioned officers, who failed to ride herd on their men. Colonel Woods witnessed the results of this failure when he inspected the vacated quarters and found "a filthy and unsanitary area." Indeed, one of the noncoms later admitted to simply assuming that "someone is going to pick it up," much as parents would make sure that nothing of value remained behind when a family moved to a new house.

The failure in discipline that attended the departure of the 51st Defense Battalion from Montford Point led to the replacement of Lieutenant Colonel Stephenson, who had built the unit and earned the respect

of its men, by Colonel Curtis W. LeGette. The new commanding officer, a native of South Carolina and a Marine since 1910, had fought in France during World War I and been wounded at Blanc Mont in October 1918. His most recent assignment was as commanding officer of the 7th Defense Battalion in the Ellice Islands. Not only was LeGette replacing a popular commander, he got off to a bad start. In his first speech to the assembled battalion, he made the mistake of invoking the phrase "you people"—frequently used by officers when addressing their white units—but in this instance his choice of "you" instead of "we" convinced some of the African-Americans that their new commanding officer considered them outsiders rather than real Marines.

The 51st Defense Battalion at War

Because they were replacing the 7th Defense Battalion, LeGette's former command, already established in the Ellice group, the black Marines turned in all the heavy equipment they had brought with them from Montford Point and boarded the merchantman SS *Meteor*, which sailed from San Diego on 11 February 1944. Less than a month had elapsed since the last train left North Carolina on the first leg of the journey to war. While *Meteor* steamed toward the Ellice Islands, the 51st Defense Battalion divided into two components. Detachment A, led by Lieutenant Colonel Gould P. Groves, the executive officer, would garrison Nanomea Island, while the rest of the battalion, under Colonel LeGette, manned the defenses of Funafuti and nearby Nukufetau. By 27 February, the 51st completed the relief of the 7th Defense Battalion, taking over the white unit's weapons and equipment. One of the African-American Marines, upon first experiencing the isolation that surrounded him, suggested that the departing whites "were never so glad