Few and proud

REMEMBERING
THE FIRST
AFRICAN-AMERICAN
MARINES

PLACES WE LOVED: Take a stroll down memory lane newsday.com/lilife
Proud to be a Montford

For years, Marines from an all-black unit went unrecognized, even though they played pivotal role in civil-rights movement.

Vincent Long of Hempstead is among the last of the Montford Point Marines, GIs who became the first black Americans to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps.

Last year, Congress bestowed the Montford Point Marines with a Congressional Gold Medal.
In this April 1943 image provided by the Marine Corps, a platoon of Montford recruits stands at parade rest in New River, N.C.

ON THE COVER: The Congressional Gold Medal awarded to Montford Point Marines.

In the 1945 image provided by the Marine Corps, Montford Marines are seen in an unnamed location in the Pacific during WWII.

In this April 1943 image provided by the Marine Corps, a platoon of Montford recruits stands at parade rest in New River, N.C.

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Recruits broke barriers

Cover Story

In the early 1940s, during the early days of World War II, Montford Point Marines participated in combat in the Pacific. They were among the first African American soldiers to serve in the Marine Corps.

In 1944, a Time magazine article praised the Montford Point Marines, who were known as "Negro Marines," for their contributions to the war effort. The article noted that despite facing discrimination and prejudice, the Montford Point Marines were integral to the success of the Allied forces.

Since then, the Montford Point Marines have been recognized for their service and have been awarded numerous medals and honors. Today, they continue to be remembered as heroes of the war and as leaders in the fight against discrimination and racism.

"We were just like anyone else," said one Montford Point Marine. "We fought for our country, and we were proud to do so."

"We never thought we would be recognized for our service," said another Marine. "But we are honored to be recognized and remembered for our contributions to the war effort."

The Montford Point Marines are an inspiration to all Americans, and their story serves as a reminder of the importance of equality and justice for all people.
Charles Anderson of Westbury Great, in service, is one of less than 750 Montford Point Marines still living.

Above, Robert Harding, 84, of Roosevelt, and Richard P. Warren, 86, of Roosevelt, right, served with the Montford Point Marines.

But racial attitudes hardened with the birth of the American nation. When Congress established the Marine Corps in 1798, Maj. William Ward Barlow, the first Marine Commandant, instructed a South Carolina recruit in a letter, saying, "You may see blacks and Mulattoes while you recruit, but you cannot order them."

The Army and Navy were employing small numbers of black troops, mostly as porters, cooks and stewardesses, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered all armed services to admit black recruits in 1942.

But the prospect of integrating the Corps' all-white fighting force spread indignation throughout the chain of command. Maj. Gen. Thomas Holcomb, then the nation's top Marine, called a Navy staff meeting in Washington in April 1943. "If it were a question of having a Marine Corps of 50,000 whites or 250,000 Negroes, I would rather have the whites." His comments to the Navy Board in January 1942 were even more inflammatory.

See COVER STORY on G8

Tues. 11/21/2006

Unknown stories

The Marines of Montford Point are a group of men that history almost forgot. Though they broke racial barriers, their story is not as well known as that of Rosa Parks, Jackie Robinson or the Sierra Club's John Muir. Yes, the impact of their effort was the same — a deep history. For that, they were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor, in 2005. Their proof in history was brought to public attention with pain and discrimination, but history was not an option.

"The racial prejudice they encountered both in the Marine Corps and in the civilian world combined with a sense that their failure would prevent the Corps from continuing to accept African-Americans increased its force considerably among the Marines at Montford Point," according to the nonprofit Montford Point Marine Association, which maintains the legacy of Black Marines.

Other notable Montford Pointers:
- Sgt. Mal Gilbert, "Tankmark" Johnson, was one of the first and most respected drill instructors in the Corps. He wrote a letter to President Harry S. Truman expressing the loyalty and commitment of the black Marines. The Montford Point facility at Camp Lejeune was renamed in his honor.
- More than 15,000 Montford recruits saw duty in the South Pacific during World War II, including in Saipan, Peleliu, Iwo Jima and Okinawa.
- Former New York City Mayor David N. Dinkins arrived at Montford Point in 1941. In a 2003 interview, he recalled his Marine Corps experience and his time at Montford Point.
- "Daring was pride in being a Marine," he said, and the training was rigorous. "They used to hang clothes up wet and told you to run around and dry them."
- The first Black Marine was Howard F. Perry of Charlotte, N.C.

For more information, go to montfordpointmarines.com

Source: Montford Point Marine Association
Finding recognition

COVER STORY from Gel.

Their desire to enter the naval service is largely, I think, to break into a club that doesn't want them."

For black recruits who began arriving when the naval service was established in 1867, the hostility was palpable.

"Theorgetown, was open," said Anderson. "You couldn't get any positions at open, and we couldn't get any positions at open where the whites were allowed."

Anderson left the Marines in January 1946, but continued in the Corps for two more years. He was assigned to the Corps in 1938 during the Korean War, and was twice employed in his position before being honorably discharged in 1947. He worked for the Navy from 1938 to 1945, then worked as a teacher at Roosevelt High School until he retired in 1976.

Though the Roosevelt recruits enlisted in the new era for the Marines were none, only 40 percent of the Corps 17,000 officers are black. The Marines, known for making up 23.4 percent of the Marine Corps, now has even reached the black service of less than 20 percent.

A Marine Corps spokesman said: "The Marine Corps is not a black or white or any other color. We are all men, and we are all equal in the eyes of God."

"It's not easy being a Marine," says one Marine, "but it's not hard being a Marine."