POLITICS IN PERSPECTIVE

Thinking on a higher plane at Park University about political debate
Conquering Congress

Park alumnus and newly appointed trustee pursues the halls of Congress to bestow the country's highest honor on unsung Marine heroes

Five years of dedicated work by Park alumnus and Board of Trustees member Joseph H. Geeter III, '99, came down to a five-minute vote by the U.S. Congress.

It all started with a phone call in 2007 from a 90-year-old former Marine, James "Rudy" Carter. Carter had just read about the Tuskegee Airmen, the first black World War II pilots, who were being recognized for their service to the country with the Congressional Gold Medal. He challenged Geeter, then national president of the Montford Point Marine Association representing the first black Marines, with one simple question: "What was he planning to do about it?"

To this devoted Marine who had endured racism and discrimination while serving in World War II, the answer was clear. "Well, Rudy," Geeter said, "it looks like I'm going to get the Congressional Gold Medal for the Montford Point Marines."

That promise launched Geeter into the wilderness known as Washington, D.C.

FIRST TO SERVE

The Montford Point Marines were the first black Americans to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps after President Franklin D. Roosevelt
Above: A platoon of Montford Point Marine recruits stand at parade rest in 1943 at New River, N.C. Breaking a tradition of 167 years, the U.S. Marine Corps enlisted blacks, June 1, 1942.

Below: Three black Marine recruits run the obstacle course at Montford Point Camp, N.C., in 1943. Exceptional recruits were singled out to serve as drill instructors.

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ordered the Armed Forces to admit African-American recruits in 1941. From 1942 to 1949, an estimated 20,000 black Americans trained at the segregated Montford Point Camp in North Carolina, and were assigned to segregated battalions and units.

In spite of rampant discrimination and racism, the Montford Point Marines demonstrated loyalty, hard work and a willingness to serve a nation that, at the time, did not offer them many basic civil rights.

In 1965, more than 400 "Montford Pointers" met for a reunion that sparked the establishment of the Montford Point Marine Association, a nonprofit veteran group based in Philadelphia. Today, the MPMA has 37 chapters across the U.S.

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**WINDING ROAD**

Geeter learned that the Congressional Gold Medal presented to the Tuskegee Airman was the result of a bill passed by Congress. "I certainly had no idea how to get a bill passed,” Geeter said. "But I made a promise to Rudy and I was determined to figure it out.”

Geeter boldly set out on the winding road known as the political process.

"I was spitting until I met then Florida Sen. Anthony "Tony" Hill (D-Fla.)," Geeter said. Hill led him to influential people and groups, starting with U.S. Rep. Corrine Brown (D-Fla.) and the Congressional Black Caucus of U.S. Legislators.

Geeter was able to secure 20 minutes at their next meeting. He invited several original Montford Pointers to tell their stories to the captivated audience; 40 minutes later the Congressional Black Caucus was enthusiastically behind Geeter's plan to pursue the Congressional Gold Medal for these deserving Marines.

"Their stories are powerful,” Geeter said. For the most part, blacks didn’t receive the same military recognition or opportunities after the war, he said. While white Marines were regarded as heroes, black Marines were cautious to even wear their uniform for fear of being arrested for impersonating a Marine. Despite the unfairness, Geeter said they don’t harbor regret or animosity. "They are proud of their service to their country.”

When Brown agreed to co-sponsor the legislation for the medal, her assistant called Geeter to ask for the bill. The bill?

"I discovered it was up to me to draft something," Geeter said, "and I had no idea how to write a bill." But he figured it out quickly with the help of Google. Although just two pages long, the bill took Geeter most of a weekend to write. "The facts, dates, spelling — everything had to be just right," he said. "My Park education came in handy.”

Within weeks, an official number was assigned to the bill. "That’s when the real work began,” he said.

**TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY**

Geeter credits his 25-year military career for preparing him for nearly every challenge in life — including Washington, D.C. He spent countless hours walking the bewildering halls of Congress looking for "targets of opportunity” — his military term for catching influential people to ask for their support.

He quickly realized that Congress was in no hurry. "There was always something else at the forefront — a budget, a health care plan,” Geeter said. "They had bigger fish to fry than my little bill.”

Geeter didn’t have a lobbying budget to wine and dine influencers. He had a few handouts, time and tenacity. "I don’t give up easily,” he said.

**NATIONAL BUZZ**

Encouraging encounters fueled his hopes, such as meeting Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) who Geeter said looked him "square
in the eye” and assured him the bill would have his vote. “That’s when I knew there was a real chance to make this happen,” he said.

Fast-forward to the 2011 MPMA convention in Atlanta — home to CNN. "CNN covered our bill and other media outlets picked up the story,” Geeter said. "It started a national buzz.”

Just as the bill was gaining momentum toward a vote in the U.S. House of Representatives, Geeter hit a classic political roadblock: re-election. After the November 2010 elections, some key sponsors of the bill didn’t get re-elected. “We nearly had to start over,” Geeter said.

Brown encouraged him not to lose faith and reintroduced the bill in the House in July 2011. Despite the setback, Geeter’s efforts had momentum. By now, he had built a lobbying team. “It was no longer just me in D.C. with my lonely suitcase,” he said.

Their perseverance paid off. On Oct. 25, 2011, the bill came up for a vote in the House of Representatives.

C-SPAN SUSPENSE

Geeter remembers racing home to watch the vote on C-SPAN. "I watched it like it was the Super Bowl,” he said. The bill needed 290 of 435 votes; “yay” votes displayed on an electronic board rose quickly from 20 to 120... then it happened: a “nay” vote.

Fortunately, this was a fluke and the “nay” vote turned to the positive. “Either someone pushed the wrong button or they didn’t want to be the only knucklehead to vote no,” Geeter said. The final vote was 422 to zero. "I jumped up hollering and even took a picture of the TV screen!” Geeter said. “Five years of hard work came down to a five-minute vote. It was incredible.”

SUPER MAJORITY

If a bill has overwhelming support in the House, it needs a “super majority” to pass in the Senate, or 67 of 100 votes. On Nov. 9, 2011, Sen. Kay Hagan (D-N.C.) introduced the bill on the Senate floor. “She kept them through the dinner hour to pass the bill in time to celebrate the 236th anniversary of the U.S. Marine Corps on Nov. 10,” Geeter said. He received a call late on the evening of Nov. 9. The bill had passed the Senate.

On Nov. 23, 2011, President Barack Obama signed the bill into law that would bestow the highest honor to the Montford Point Marines: the Congressional Gold Medal.

Unfortunately, Geeter and the Montford Pointers were not present when Obama signed the bill. Once the Senate passes a bill, the president has 10 days to sign it. He had been out of the country and needed to sign several bills unceremoniously before the Thanksgiving holiday.

However, a big celebration is being planned for June 27, when the Congressional Gold Medal will be presented to the Montford Point Marines at the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center. To fulfill his promise, Geeter said he looks forward to personally inviting Carter to attend.