Brashear to be honored for service as Montford Point Marine

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MORGAN CITY — About 68 years after serving in the Marine Corps, William Joseph Brashear will be honored Saturday for his service as one of the first black Marine Corps members in the country.

Brashear, 89, of Morgan City, is set to be honored with the Congressional Gold Medal at 11 a.m. Saturday at Mt. Era Baptist Church in Morgan City.

The Granville Alexander Chapter 7 New Orleans of the National Montford Point Marine Association will present the medal.

Brashear joined the United States Marine Corps in March 1943 shortly after the Marine Corps began taking black marines in 1942. Brashear said, up to that point, the Marine Corps had not admitted blacks in its 115-year history, he said.

He was stationed at Montford Point Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, he said. Montford Point was designated specifically for black marines, he said.

In July 1948, President Harry Truman issued an executive order ending segregation in the military, and in September 1949, Montford Point was deactivated ending seven years of segregation, according to a news release from the Granville Alexander Chapter.

On Nov. 23, 2011, Congress passed an act to award the Congressional Gold Medal to the Montford Point Marines, according to documents provided by the Granville Alexander Chapter.

Brashear said it means “quite a bit” to be given the Congressional Gold Medal. “The way it all happened, the guy drove up in a pickup truck, and he said ‘Are you William Brashear?’ I said ‘Yes, sir, I am.’ And he said, ‘Well, we’ve got a medal to give you,” Brashear said recalling finding out about the medal a couple months ago.

While in the Marine Corps, Brashear participated in two major invasions during World War II, the invasion of Saipan, and the invasion of Okinawa, during which he broke his leg crippling him, he said. Brashear was discharged shortly after becoming crippled in 1946, he said. Because of the injury, Brashear’s right leg is 2.5 inches shorter than his left leg, he said.

Brashear does not remember what happened to cause his injury, he said. He just remembers waking up in a first aid station, the doctor giving him a morphine shot, a Camel cigarette and a glass of ice water, he said. When he regained feeling, Brashear realized he was in a body cast from the waist down, he said.

Brashear was glad the war ended, due to the U.S. dropping the atomic bomb, before his unit was sent to Tokyo, he said.

Upon entering the military, Brashear had the option to choose between serving in the Marine Corps or the Navy, and he chose to join the Marine Corps, he said. One doctor said Brashear was too light for the Marine Corps because he only weighed 120 pounds, and Marine Corps members needed to weigh at least 135 pounds, Brashear remembered. Then another doctor said Brashear would be fine to join the Marine Corps and Brashear got in, he said.

Brashear reflected on what segregation of the Marine Corps was like. “We didn’t train together. We had our barracks, living quarters separate. We didn’t eat together,” Brashear said. While overseas, white and black soldiers were even separated to watch outdoor movies, he said. “They had a rope. That rope came down the line. Blacks on one side, Whites on one side,” Brashear said.

Brashear also remembers facing discrimination once he got back to Morgan City. Brashear got off a train on Railroad Avenue between midnight and 1 a.m., and he could not walk more than about two blocks at a time with his injured leg, he said. Brashear spotted a cab and whistled for it to stop for him, Brashear said.

“He backed up, and when I opened the door to get in, he said, ‘I’m sorry, partner, we don’t ride colored,’ and I said ‘thank you,’” Brashear said.

Brashear thought to himself at the time, “Look, I’ve been in World War II and got crippled and can’t ride in a cab.”

Brashear was born and raised in Morgan City, he said. The only times he has not lived in Morgan City was when he lived with his uncle, a deep sea diver, in San Diego, and during his time in the service, he said. Brashear worked as a crane operator in the Morgan City area for 48 years and has lived in same house in Morgan City since 1939, he said. Brashear lives with his wife of 48 years, Idele Brashear.