Jacksonville’s Fallen Heroes Honored

Every day we pass people in the street and have no idea what glory they may carry. Such is the case with Jacksonville native Alpha Preston Gainous. A dignified, articulate man with a relaxed, friendly manner, Gainous has a welcoming spirit and humble, matter-of-fact attitude that belies the fact that he is a trailblazer in American history.

If you know something about World War II and the evolution of the fight against segregation in the American armed forces, then the garrison cap that he wears on special occasions might give him away. It is emblazoned with the words, “Original Montford Pointer, 1943-1946” and distinguishes Gainous as one of the first African Americans to serve as a United States Marine.

“I rather have that cap upon my head than the crown of England,” said Gainous, 86. “I had to wade through blood and guts for that cap. It opened my mind up and all doors sprang open for me.”

DRAFTED INTO THE ARMY IN 1943 AT AGE 18, Gainous opted to transfer to the Marine Corps for a reason that speaks to the character of the man: “I wanted the best training available.”

It was only a year earlier that Gainous’ choice even became an option. At that time, the United States military — like the country that it defended — was legally segregated. In 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt, under pressure from Mary McLeod Bethune, A. Phillip Randolph and other African American leaders, issued an executive order prohibiting racial discrimination in the armed forces. It took a Presidential directive in 1942 before African Americans could enlist into the Marines.

Even still, they were forbidden to participate in boot camp with their white counterparts at Paris Island or San Diego and were instead segregated to Montford Point Camp, a satellite of Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, North Carolina.

“There did everything they could to make us fail as marines. As black males we were almost denied of our presence, denied of ourselves,” said Gainous. He trained for six months at the camp before being “attached” to the 5th Amphibious Service Battalion aboard the flagship USS Rocky Mount to fight the war in the Marshall Islands. He mostly served aboard ship. “We were ‘attached’ to those units, but not really in those units, by law. We couldn’t actually fight; we had to serve. But at times when you’re going to a place where the war is real hot and everybody is dying, then everybody fights. But after that it goes back to the same thing.”

He clearly remembers the indignity when the ship’s admiral told the media that there were no “colored” Marines in the Marshall Islands campaign. “As an African American there was no such thing as receiving glory,” said Gainous. Despite such treatment, Gainous holds no animosity about those times. “That’s just the way it was. I don’t have a mind that makes me want to hate anybody. I wouldn’t trade my life for all the tea in China. I’ve had a beautiful life.”

After a month in the Marshall Islands, Gainous spent the remainder of his tour in Hawaii serving intelligence officers until his discharge in 1946. “I didn’t want to go to war,” said Gainous. “But it was better for me that I did. It opened up my horizons. It was only three years, but that was a lifetime.”

In 1948 President Harry Truman issued an executive order negating segregation. A year later, Montford Point was deactivated. Twenty thousand African Americans trained there between 1942 and 1946, of which around 150 are still alive.

But the battle is not quite finished. The Montford Point Marine Association is a non-profit that is fighting to gain the same national recognition for the original Montford Pointers that has been bestowed upon their more famous Air Force and Army counterparts, the Tuskegee Airmen and the Buffalo Soldiers: A Congressional Gold Medal. A bill co-sponsored by Rep. Corrine Brown is currently before Congress. Gainous has faith that the bill will pass. All his life, he has followed a “universal law” that he credits for his success and which he thinks will operate in this case, too: “Knock and the door shall open, seek and you shall find, ask and you will be given.” If not so humble, he might also add, “Look and you shall see great men among us.”

For more information about the Montford Point Marines visit the Montford Point Marine Association website: http://www.montfordpointmarines.com/index.html

Honoring Jacksonville’s Military Heroes

BATTLEFIELD MARKED by the flag that he wears on special occasions, Alpha Preston Gainous is a true trailblazer. Although he was born after World War II, his name is forever emblazoned on the Wall of the Jacksonville Veterans Memorial Wall, a tribute to the fallen heroes of Jacksonville. A majority of the names listed on theWall are those of military personnel who lost their lives in World War II. Although Jacksonville was not a port, the city’s Navy Band Southeast and Jacksonville Pipes and Drum provided pre-ceremony music. The keynote speakers were U. S. Congresswoman Corrine Brown, U. S. Congressman Ander Crenshaw, Lt. Governor Jennifer Carroll and Mayor John Peyton.

The Wall is a tribute to the women and men who were killed since World War I. Presently, the Wall has over 1,700 names listed. Three new names were added to the Veterans Memorial Wall since last year. Army Pvt. Jonathan Millanueva, Lt. Robert Huish and Chief Petty Officer David Gilbert. Special memorial wreaths were placed by the families in front of the Wall. All three families gave emotional speeches and shared happy moments that they shared about their loved ones.

The program precluded with presentation of service wreaths, community wreath laying and selected family tributes.

Hundreds of relatives and friends turned out on a hot Monday morning to honor Jacksonville’s fallen heroes. The day was June 30, 2011, Memorial Day. The Veterans Memorial Wall on East Adams Street is located near EverBank Stadium in Jacksonville.

Naval Band Southeast and Jacksonville Pipes and Drum provided pre-ceremony music. The keynote speakers were U. S. Congresswoman Corrine Brown, U. S. Congressman Ander Crenshaw, Lt. Governor Jennifer Carroll and Mayor John Peyton.

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LEFT: Purple Heart recipient Samuel Maldrew and his wife Erma.

LEFT: Lt. Governor Jennifer Carroll with Captain Andy Blommer, Commanding Officer, U.S. Coast Guard Base Mayport.

BOT TOM LEFT: Pat Smith held a picture of her son, Keith V. Robinson, USN as she touched his name on the wall. BOTTOM: RIGHT: MU3 Brandon Potts of the Navy Bands Southeast ended the ceremony with “Echo Taps.”

Alpha Preston Gainous

Photo by Ron Breaker

Fighting for Freedom

By Steve DiMattia

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RIGHT: Congresswoman Corrine Brown with City Councilman Regina Cashmyr (Reggie) Brown CW2 U. S. Army. Photos by Cashmyr