

MEDALS FOR 1ST BLACK MARINES
'IT'S TIME' AN HONOR LONG OVERDUE
Congress gives thanks, rights wartime injustices
By Todd Spangler Free Press Washington Staff

WASHINGTON — The ravages of age — the failing eyesight, the shuffling gaits, the graying hair — couldn't mask the pride of old Marines, in their 80s or 90s now, who had lived long enough to see their day come at last.

With a ceremony in a hall connected to the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday, the nation's first African-American Marines — the Montford Point Marines, so called for the segregated, mosquito-ridden North Carolina camp they trained at in the 1940s — got their just due from a grateful nation when they were presented the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award bestowed by the U.S. government.

Smiles crossed wrinkled faces, and stooped backs straightened at the sound of martial music. At the presentation of the colors, withered hands rose in salute to touch weathered brows and to remember.

"The best (word) I can think of is 'elation,'" said Calvin Shepherd, 87, who traveled from Inkster. "I'm floating on the air a little bit."

It was a fitting end to what was an ugly chapter in the nation's history: At the height of World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt cleared the way for the desegregation of the U.S. Marine Corps in 1942. But the African-American men who signed up were trained in a segregated camp — Montford Point, at Camp Lejeune, New River, N.C. — where white officers put them into harsh conditions. They were then held back, at least initially, from combat, because the brass considered them unfit to fight as Marines.

"They were trained to fight injustice overseas. Meanwhile, they suffered discrimination every day," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nevada, who presented the medal — approved unanimously by Congress last year — along with House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio.

More than 19,000 men received basic training at Montford Point between 1942 and 1949; only about 420 survive. Many live in metro Detroit. The Montford Point Marine Association said about 370 of the survivors made it to Washington, including more than two dozen from Michigan.

"I think it's one great thing for we black Marines," said Benjamin Flournoy, 86, of Detroit, who trained at Montford Point before being sent to the Pacific in World War II in a noncombat role. "To my mind, it came a little late. ... For so long, the blacks were denied."

In 2006, Congress awarded the Congressional Gold Medal to the Tuskegee Airmen — African-American pilots who fought in World War II. To Flournoy's thinking, that cleared the way for the Montford Point men.

"I hate to use the word 'overdue' ... but it's time," said Yoder Faulkner, 81, of Detroit, who was raised in Winston-Salem, N.C., and trained at Montford Point before serving in Korea. "A lot of men died not knowing. ... As though it just didn't matter, you know?"

Riley Ford, 81, of Bloomfield Hills, said: "I never expected that America would quote evolve this way," speaking of the day's recognition for the first black Marines. He trained at Montford Point before going to Korea.

At the ceremony, the pride — and the respect for the Montford Point Marines — was evident. Younger Marines helped their elders reach their seats. Members of Congress spoke in reverent tones about the sacrifices made by the men who desegregated the Marine Corps. Shepherd said the Marine Band put him in mind to march.

"Some of the (white) guys would say, 'Here comes our rear echelon.' We did what we were told to do. We didn't want to be the rear echelon," Shepherd said.

The gold medal itself will be sent to the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Quantico, Va., with the men — or their designated descendants — receiving bronze replicas at a parade today outside the Washington, D.C., barracks.

The medal says: "Montford Point Marines 1942-1949" on one side. On the other: "For Outstanding Perseverance and Courage that Inspired Social Change in the Marine Corps."

Congress has awarded dozens of gold medals — to Ulysses Grant, Thomas Edison, Robert Frost, Joe Louis, the Tuskegee Airmen and many others. In 1776, the Continental Congress awarded the first one to George Washington.

"I'm going to cherish it. I'm going to put it in a case and hang it on the wall in a prominent place for everyone to see," said Calvin Moore, an 89-year-old Detroit man who trained at Montford Point and remembers well the harsh treatment the Marines gave him in basic training and the racism he and others were forced to endure for wanting to defend their country.

Robert Hassler, 87, of Detroit said all the attention heaped on him in recent months — as the Free Press publicized the award and the stories of the men who earned it — has been embarrassing at times. Just last Saturday, he went to a restaurant that had posted a newspaper photo of him, and, as Hassler described it, people made a fuss when they learned it was him.

“I never thought I was doing anything for anyone. Understand?” he said. “I was just looking for adventure when I joined the Marine Corps.”

He remembered how hard basic training was and how he was disciplined for forgetting his hat and not knowing how to take care of it. He had never owned a hat before.

He remembered tough drill sergeants, hard conditions and poor treatment.

But as a young man from Milwaukee, he took it, “and that treatment was to make you a better Marine,” he said.

The Marines taught Hassler to be stoic, hard, he said, but that has gotten difficult as he sees all the praise being given him now. Speaking Tuesday night, he took out a handkerchief and wiped at his eyes.

“It never occurred to me that this would be happening,” he said. “It just overwhelms me.”

“Once I got discharged, I thought that was it. ... I can’t describe how much this really means to me,” said Hassler, who went to the Pacific Theatre in World War II after leaving North Carolina.

“I don’t know if I could find words for it, to tell you the truth. This is such an honor, there are no words for it.”