

Our State[®]

DOWN
HOME
IN

NORTH CAROLINA

JANUARY 2006 \$4.95

famous firsts

plus: the largest, smallest, tallest, and oldest



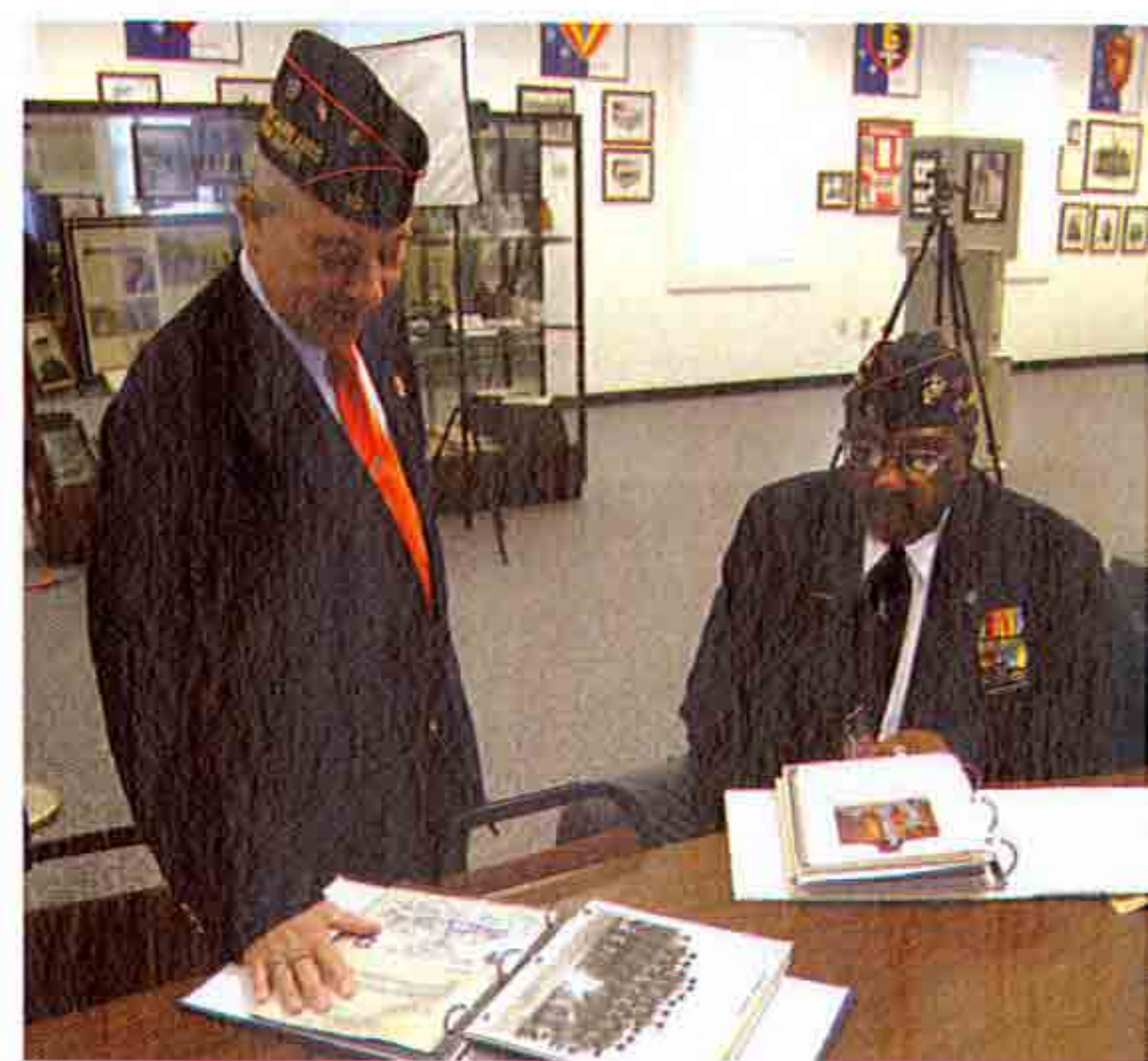
To the Corps

Before the civil rights movement gained momentum in the 1960s, a group of brave pioneers in Jacksonville stepped forward as the nation's first black Marines.

BY CAROLE MOORE



PHOTOS BY BILL WHITE



Museum artifacts (top) include historical photographs and uniforms (left). Above: Master Sgt. Johnnie Thompkins Jr., left, and Master Sgt. Adner Batts Jr. (both retired) reminisce over scrapbooks.

When Turner Blount arrived in Jacksonville from his home in Keysville, Georgia, in 1943, he was one of the first African-Americans allowed in the Marine Corps. At that time, the Corps established a separate basic training camp for blacks at Montford Point.

None of the nearly 20,000 black recruits who went through basic training from 1942 through 1949 were welcomed by the city or their fellow Marines.

White drill instructors turned the first groups of black recruits into Marines. After that, black DIs took over, and they made the white DIs seem mellow. "The black Marine leaders instilled in us that we had to prove ourselves," says Blount.

Their survival hinged on their toughness and ability to shrug off the idea that because their skin color was different, they didn't belong in the Corps. When Blount reported for training, he stood prepared to fight, and, if necessary, to die for his country. But he still couldn't cross the railroad tracks in nearby Jacksonville.

WHEN BLOUNT REPORTED FOR TRAINING, HE STOOD PREPARED TO FIGHT, AND, IF NECESSARY, DIE FOR HIS COUNTRY. BUT HE STILL COULDN'T CROSS THE RAILROAD TRACKS IN NEARBY JACKSONVILLE.

It hurt to be kept out, but Blount could handle small indignities on his way to his ultimate goal — to become a U.S. Marine. He would stay on his side of the tracks if it meant one day wearing the Corps' eagle, globe, and anchor insignia.

Looking to the future

As World War II raged, Americans stretched their resources to cover their country's wartime obligations. At home, women worked in factories and lived with rationing. Men fought from foxholes and ships, flew fighters, and assaulted foreign beaches.

But men and women of color — particularly African-Americans — were afforded little opportunity to contribute to the war effort. Although some of the armed services admitted blacks, they were mostly confined to supply and service specialties and

often served in black-only units. Previously barred from serving in the Marine Corps, blacks gained entrance through an executive order signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, at the urging of his wife, Eleanor, a human rights pioneer. Executive Order 8802 forced the commandant of the Marine Corps to admit blacks.

Black men jumped at the opportunity and lined up at the recruiters' offices. Many left the Navy or Army for a crack at the Corps. For some, like the Rev. Adner Batts Jr., the Marine Corps offered more than simply a chance to prove themselves as men, it also offered them a future.

"I was working at the commissioned officer's mess at Camp Lejeune and saw the posters to 'see the world,' and I had just lost my mother," Batts says. "I needed a job."

Batts, originally from Edgecombe and now a resident of Hampstead, joined in 1948. Marine boot camp had a reputation for weeding out the weak, and Batts says the truck carrying him and fellow black recruits to Montford Point emphasized that point by pulling up next to a small cemetery near the post. The driver made the passengers line up outside. "He said to us, 'These are the ones who didn't make it,'" Batts remembers. While the cemetery didn't really hold failed recruits, the new guys got the message: Boot camp was rough; boot camp for black Marines was rougher still.

Batts says many Camp Lejeune Marines had little exposure to African-Americans, which made life more difficult. Whenever black recruits interacted with white Marines, they walked on eggshells, even during

New order: Master Sgt. Johnnie Thompkins Jr. (retired), who completed basic training at Montford Point in 1946, congratulates Sgt. Sean McLean (left) on his promotion.



sporting competitions. The slightest perceived insult would be enough to send a black recruit packing.

"When we went to play ball with them, we had to be sure we didn't hurt anyone," Batts remembers. "We swallowed our pride and had to take a lot. But if we hadn't, there wouldn't be any black Marines."

The bare necessities

Melvin Borden, who also joined the Marine Corps in 1948, says he became a leatherneck because he wasn't afraid of hard labor — he'd worked all of his life. The Alabama native and retired serviceman, who now lives in Jacksonville, says the segregated Corps provided a challenge. "I grew up on a farm and worked in the fields," Borden says. "They didn't cut you no slack, but I didn't mind. I was used to it."

And he and other recruits found they had to get used to a few other things they hadn't counted on.

Johnnie Thompkins Jr., of New

Bern, remembers going hungry during basic training. Montford Point has its own mess hall, but, Thompkins says, much of the food allocated the black mess hall would simply disappear. "We got to the mess hall sometimes, and there wasn't enough food to go around."

In the winter, the Montford Point recruits often trained at Stone Bay Rifle Range. While white Marines had steam heat in their brick buildings, the black recruits kept warm in old stone houses using coal-burning stoves. When Thompkins' unit arrived at Stone Bay, they found no coal. "They had some, but they'd used up their allotment, so we had to go out and find broken branches and cut down trees to keep warm," Thompkins says.

Thompkins joined the service following two years of college at Winston-Salem State University and had planned to enter the Coast Guard. He ended up in the Marine Corps instead and stayed for 23

years, earning both advancement and the respect of the white Marines with whom he worked. "We really proved that the color of a man doesn't make any difference," Thompkins says. "It's what's in his heart."

Fighting to stay in

Henry McNair says that back in the old days, when a Marine recruit didn't like what was being dished out, he couldn't "call his mama or his congressman."

The Dillon, South Carolina, native decided to enlist in the Marine Corps to prove to himself he could do it. For him, the gauntlet was thrown down when he was a kid and a friend, the son of a Marine who was also a Cherokee Indian, told him blacks couldn't be Marines. In 1945, McNair proved him wrong.

Black Marines served primarily in combat support roles or as stewards, although some did see action during World War II. When the war ended, the Marines began discharging blacks.

PHOTOS BY BILL WHITE



to know more

In 1965, the Montford Point Marines Association was formed to reunite former and active-duty Marines trained at Montford Point. Following a reunion, the group launched chapters all over the country and in Japan.

MPMA members recognized that their legacy stood in danger of being forgotten as Montford veterans began to age. Not wanting their struggle to fade into the pages of history, they established a museum to preserve their story.

The Montford Point Marines Museum is housed at today's Camp Johnson. Director Finney Greggs oversees the growing collection of memorabilia and photographs. In addition, the MPMA is

cooperating with documentary filmmakers from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington on a project soon to be released.

Montford Point Marines Museum
Building M101, East Wing
Marine Corps Base
Camp Gilbert H. Johnson
Jacksonville, N.C.

Hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 11 a.m.-
2 p.m. and 4 p.m.-7 p.m.; Saturday,
11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Groups may schedule visits by calling
(910) 450-1340.



Finney Greggs (above left), director of the Montford Point Marines Museum (left), maintains the collection of African-American military memorabilia dating from 1942-1949.