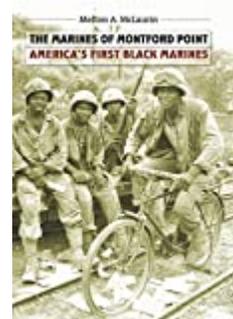


**Melton A. McLaurin.** *The Marines of Montford Point: America's First Black Marines.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. x + 202 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3097-0.



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## **Integrating the Few and the Proud: The Struggles of the First African American Marines**

As author Melton McLaurin points out, the historical contributions of African Americans in military units such as the Tuskegee Airmen and the Buffalo Soldiers are well known, but their service in the Marine Corps is far less familiar. *The Marines of Montford Point: America's First Black Marines* helps to fill that void. The U.S. Army and Navy had long relied on African American soldiers and sailors, but it was not until President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 in June 1941 that the Marine Corps followed suit. The Corps displayed its reticence toward the mandate by establishing a segregated boot camp for African American recruits at Montford Point in Jacksonville, North Carolina.

McLaurin focuses most of his work on the Montford Point marines' training during World War II, although the Korean and Vietnam Wars also receive some attention. After providing a brief overview of African American service in the U.S. military from the American Revolution to the present, McLaurin presents the Marine Corps' story through a series of interviews that he arranged thematically. Taken together, the chapters reveal the progressive integration and increasing acceptance of

African Americans in the Marine Corps over time.

With the assistance of retired Marine officer Dr. Clarence Willie, McLaurin conducted sixty-one interviews using fifteen central questions, including queries about the reasons the interviewees joined the Marine Corps, encounters with racism, and opinions about training. When initial responses proved promising, the interviewers followed up with more detailed questions. While McLaurin sets out his methodology clearly, he does not explore its limitations. For example, the author never mentions problems with using oral histories, such as the fallibility of personal recollections.

Unsurprisingly, a great number of the interviews mention racism. The story, however, is more complex than that. The Corps assigned to Montford Point officers and drill instructors who had served in the Philippines or the Caribbean on the assumption that they would have greater insights into training African Americans. McLaurin suggests that the concern of these marines with advancing their careers helped to temper some of the racism to which the recruits might otherwise have been subjected. African American recruits at Montford

Point encountered the most virulent racism off base in the hostile and highly segregated environment of the South. This surprised many of the northern recruits. Regardless of racial tensions on base, white marines occasionally sprang to the defense of black marines when off base. Harassment of African American marines eased after World War II, especially after President Henry Truman's Executive Order 9981 brought an end to official segregation in the military. Integrated combat service during the Korean War further eroded racism in the Marine Corps.

For the most part, the interview format of *The Marines of Montford Point* leaves readers to draw their own conclusions and connections, and it largely ignores the historiographical debates that swirl around this topic. For this reason, this work might be best suited for use in a classroom setting, enabling students to grapple with the different perspectives evident in the interviews. The drawback to such use, however, is the celebratory tone running throughout the chapter commentaries, which often distracts from the interviews themselves. The author repeatedly implies that race trumps all other explanations for understanding the experiences of the Montford Point marines, even when he is unable to provide causal links to support such claims. McLaurin makes the generalization, for example, that all African American recruits "shared a fierce determination not just to complete their training successfully, but to excel, to prove to the world they could be exemplary Marines" (p. 23). Such hyperbole fills the introductory segments of each chapter, even when the interviews suggest a more normative distribution of motives and ambitions. The attributes of the Montford Point marines that the author ascribes to race are not clearly distinct from the natural tendency of many recruits to take pride in overcoming

the challenges of boot camp. Moreover, those interviewed for this study were, for the most part, self-selected by virtue of completing boot camp and affiliating themselves with the Montford Point Association. Elsewhere, the author suggests that common experiences of these newly minted marines—such as playing cards—reveal camaraderie unique to the environment of Montford Point. In short, the author appears to be convinced that the experience of these marines may be explained almost exclusively by the color of their skin.

These criticisms are not meant to detract from the contributions of the Montford Point marines but rather to suggest that simply celebrating their experiences uncritically limits the work's usefulness. Some historiography, for example, reveals the galvanizing impact that service in other branches of the military had on African Americans during the Second World War and the ways in which that experience shaped their postwar lives and the civil rights movement.[1] A reliance on interviews, however, runs the risk of imposing the perspective of hindsight on all aspects of the Montford Point marines' experiences, thus obscuring the change that possibly occurred over time. Furthermore, supplementing interviews with more historical documentation would have strengthened the work. Eschewing celebratory tones for greater interrogation might produce an even more analytically rigorous and fascinating story for both historians and the Montford Point marines who made history.

#### Note

[1]. See, for example, Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

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