VFW Supports Montford Point Marines

Senate urged to pass Congressional Gold Medal legislation

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The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. is urging the Senate to pass S. 1527 to authorize the award of the Congressional Gold Medal to the Montford Point Marines of World War II. Its companion bill passed unanimously in the House earlier this week.

"The Montford Point Marines paved the way for future generations of African Americans to proudly call themselves United States Marines," said VFW National Commander Richard L. DeNoyer, a retired Marine and Vietnam combat veteran from Middleton, Mass. "And just like the Army's Buffalo Soldiers and the Air Force's Tuskegee Airmen, they must be properly recognized for their service, their sacrifice, and most especially for their perseverance to overcome the racial challenges of the time to help our nation fight and win World War II."

The House bill, H.R. 2447, was introduced in July by Rep. Corrine Brown (D-Fla.), and had garnered 308 bipartisan cosponsors before Tuesday's 422-0 vote. S. 1527 was introduced in September by Sen. Kay Hagan (D-N.C.) and currently has 27 bipartisan cosponsors, but the bill was referred for action to the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs. It has yet to exit the committee. DeNoyer wants S. 1527 brought to a vote when the Senate reconvenes next week.

The history of Montford Point is rooted in pride and prejudice, according to the Montfort Point Marines Association. President Franklin D. Roosevelt opened up the military services to recruit African Americans in 1941, but it still took a 1942 presidential directive to give them the opportunity to be recruited into the Marine Corps. Instead of going to established training facilities on Parris Island, S.C., or in San Diego, Calif., a segregated boot camp called Montford Point was created next to Camp Lejeune, N.C., where 20,000 African American Marines would eventually be trained between 1942 and 1949.

In a July 30 speech in Atlanta before the Montford Point Marines Association, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. James F. Amos said their story and struggle for equality and acceptance in the Corps did not end when they left Montford Point; rather, it had just begun, because

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they were not allowed to become infantrymen or to serve in other mainstream military occupational specialties.

"It's ironic, but the Marines from Montford Point who saw the most action in World War II were those assigned to segregated ammunition and depot companies," said Amos, who is a strong advocate of the Congressional Gold Medal legislation. "To resupply the front lines, these men often had to fight their way to the front, and then carry back wounded white Marines to the rear for medical care. [They] demonstrated their mettle during vicious and bloody fighting in places like Saipan and Okinawa."

Their courage under fire and fidelity to fellow Marines, regardless of skin color, began to erode the cruel and false generational stereotype within the Corps that blacks could not, and would not, fight in the face of danger. This led Gen. Alexander Vandegrift, then Commandant of the Marine Corps, who had observed the courage of black Marines in hand-to-hand combat on Saipan, to say "The experiment with the Negro Marines is over. They are Marines ... period!"

As the Marine Corps prepares for its 236th birthday on Nov. 10, the VFW national commander said there could be no more fitting tribute than for the Senate to announce beforehand that they, too, agree that the Montford Point Marines should be awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.

"This is about properly honoring a group of patriotic Americans who battled an enemy abroad and racism at home," said DeNoyer, who is now asking his two million VFW and Auxiliary members to urge their U.S. senators to pass S. 1527. "This recognition is long overdue, and with the VFW's support, we hope it soon becomes reality."

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