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United States Marine Corps  
Command and Staff College  
Marine Corps University  
2076 South Street  
Marine Corps Combat Development Command  
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**TITLE:**

Segregation versus Integration:  
The Racial Policy of the Marine Corps from 1942-1962.

**AUTHOR:**

Major Christopher A. Browning, USMC

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Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Jonathan F. Phillips, Ph.D.  
Approved: [Signature]  
Date: 25 March 2013

Oral Defense Committee Member: ERIC Y. SHIBUYA, Ph.D.  
Approved: [Signature]  
Date: 25 MARCH 2013

## Executive Summary

**Title:** Segregation versus Integration: The Racial Policy of the Marine Corps from 1942-1962.

**Author:** Major Christopher A. Browning, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** With its implementation of a “separate but equal” racial policy in the 1940s, the Marine Corps struggled to accept the cultural transformation with regards to civil rights, ultimately weakening its warfighting capability.

**Discussion:** With the arrival of the first African American recruits in August of 1942, the Marine Corps embarked on a 20-year journey towards racial integration. Facing heavy opposition from senior leaders inside the Corps, it was quickly understood that most were opposed to allowing African Americans into the ranks. Mandated by law, the Marine Corps decided that segregation (under the auspice of separate but equal) was the best policy. Riddled with inconsistencies and improper application of the rules, this policy remained in effect for almost two decades. Facing pressure from outside agencies and those within the ranks, the Marine Corps struggled with equality and the rights of those who faithfully served. This study does not seek to justify the rationale behind the Marine Corps’ decision to implement segregation, but rather understand the reasons behind its decision.

**Conclusion:** Reluctant to change, the Marine Corps drove a racial policy that not only weakened its public persona, but also ultimately wasted an untold amount of money while squandering manpower requirements with the duplication of separate training and fleet units.

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## DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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## *Preface*

The premise behind this research paper was to gain a better understanding of what drove the Marine Corps to enact a policy of racial segregation that lasted nearly 20 years and why, as an institution, the Marine Corps was so resistant to change. This topic is intriguing and I believe one can draw parallels to the social evolution that we are witnessing today. Current topics such as the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and “Women in Combat” are strikingly similar in terms of the Marine Corps’ initial stance with regard to a degradation in warfighting capabilities. While these two subjects aren’t addressed extensively in this paper, one can draw connections to the mindset of the Marine Corps and why cultural transformation is difficult to generate within the ranks.

I would like to thank my Civilian Advisor, Dr. J. F. Phillips, for taking the time to brainstorm with me as I walked through the process. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Charles Neimeyer, Director of the Marine Corps History Division, and Mr. John Lyles of the Marine Corps Archive Division, for assisting in my research.

Since its inception, the United States Marine Corps has been recognized as one of the premier fighting units in the world. A storied history, the Marine Corps has always taken pride in its ability to adapt quickly to meet the changing demands of the United States. While this ability to adapt in warfare can be considered a hallmark trait, the Corps' response to social changes has not always been as impressive. The integration of African Americans is one such case. With the arrival of the first African American recruits in August of 1942, the Marine Corps embarked on a twenty-year journey towards full racial integration. The last service to accept African Americans into its ranks, the Marine Corps decided that segregation, under the construct of "separate but equal," was the correct policy. Facing social and political pressures from civil rights advocates and those within their own service, the Marine Corps struggled with equality for its minority members. Riddled with inconsistencies and improper application of the laws and regulations, the Marine Corps' stand on segregation inflicted social turmoil and spawned racial discontent in those who served faithfully. Resistant to integration, the Marine Corps drove a policy that not only weakened its public persona, but also ultimately wasted an untold amount of money while squandering manpower requirements with the duplication of separate training and fleet units. As African Americans continued to fill the ranks and prove their merit in places like Peleliu and Okinawa during World War II (WWII), the Marine Corps finally began to understand that skin color was not a factor in determining a person's ability to serve.

As the postwar period began, the Marine Corps continued to struggle with the inclusion of African Americans into its ranks. Still concerned with a complete shift in a policy towards complete integration, senior officials remained convinced that "separate but equal" was not only sufficient, but also the correct policy. As the nation's attitude towards the advancement of civil rights began to evolve, the Marine Corps continued its unwavering stance towards total

segregation. Not until 1948 with the signing of Executive Order 9981 did the Marine Corps finally begin the process of complete integration. It was not until 1951 that the Marine Corps finally proclaimed full integration.

This paper will examine the reasoning that compelled the Marine Corps to adopt segregation and the distinct challenges faced both internally and externally with this policy. Finally, it will analyze how and why the policy of “separate but equal” transformed over time towards one of complete integration. By tracing the evolution of this policy from WWII through the Korean War, it will help establish a timeline to understand how the advancements of civil liberties within our nation contributed to the social transformation of the military.

While 1942 is recognized as the year the integration movement was officially introduced, historical evidence provides proof that African Americans had served periodically in the Marine Corps prior to this date. Payroll records demonstrate during the War of Independence “there were at least three blacks in the ranks of the Continental Marines and ten others who served as Marines on ships of the Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania navies.”<sup>1</sup> From 1798 to 1800, several hundred served in the Navy and Marine Corps during the war with France despite the first Secretary of the Navy, Benjamin Stoddard, issuing a decree prohibiting the admission of African Americans or “mulattos.”<sup>2</sup> During the Nineteenth Century, there are no records indicating that any African Americans served in the Marine Corps.<sup>3</sup> Documentation on the existence of African American Marines prior to the early 1940’s is almost non-existent. Misplaced files and incomplete record keeping have forced historians to estimate on the actual number of African Americans who may have served. What is widely recognized is that the known recruitment and enlistment of African Americans from the Revolutionary War through World War I (WWI) was strictly forbidden.<sup>4</sup>

Although entrance into the Marine Corps was strictly prohibited, both the United States Army and Navy were allowing African Americans into their ranks. The Army enforced a “separate but equal” policy very similar to the one the Marine Corps would eventually adopt. During WWI, African Americans “made up nearly 11 percent of the Army’s total strength.”<sup>5</sup> The Navy implemented a more liberal policy towards integration. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, African Americans made up approximately 20 to 30 percent of the enlisted strength of the Navy. Near the turn of the century, those numbers had quickly diminished. “Paralleling the rise of Jim Crow and legalized segregation in much of America was the cutback in the number of Black sailors, who by 1909 were mostly in the galley and engine room.”<sup>6</sup> By the end of WWI, the African American community made up only 1.2 percent of the Navy’s total strength.<sup>7</sup> For those that served honorably during WWI, once they returned home from the war, they found themselves reduced once again to second-rate citizens. Feeling marginalized and weary of the way they were being treated, African Americans formed civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League and the Brothers of Sleeping Cars Porter.<sup>8</sup> Growing in popularity, these groups made headlines by demanding to be heard in Washington, DC. During the interwar period, they advocated for racial equality and became the voice for the African American community.

In January 1941, A. Phillip Randolph, a key leader of the Brothers of Sleeping Cars Porter, called for a march on Washington later that year “to protest the exclusion of Blacks from defense industry and their humiliation in the armed forces.”<sup>9</sup> With an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 scheduled to participate in the march, the government was very concerned about the political uprising in the African American community. Under heavy pressure to act, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Fair Employment Practices Commission Act, also known as

Executive Order 8802, on 25 June 1941. His signature set forth the first step towards the integration of the Armed Services. It stated, “In affirming the policy of full participation in the defense program by all persons regardless of color, race, creed, or national origin, and directing certain action in furtherance of said policy.... all departments of the government, including the Armed Forces, shall lead the way in erasing discrimination over color or race.”<sup>10</sup> The President was very careful in selecting his words. While this order established the foundation for racial integration in the Armed Services, its wording left its implementation open to broad interpretation. By doing so, it allowed him to appease the pro-civil rights population who pushed for this order, while still pandering to those who believed segregation was the correct policy for the United States. While it can be argued this order fell well short of its original intent, it opened the door for the African American community to equal opportunity in the Armed Services.

Obligated to comply, the Marine Corps decided to establish an all reserve force of 900 men (later increased to 1200) that would be trained at a segregated facility in North Carolina (NC) later to be known as Montford Point. Opened in August 1942, the base was adjacent to Camp Lejeune, near the town of Jacksonville. In order to construct this facility, \$750,000 was allocated to build the necessary barracks and support facilities.<sup>11</sup> The location of Montford Point was chosen for two reasons. First, the Marine Corps already owned the land, thus offsetting the overall cost. Additionally, Montford Point was viewed as the least intrusive location to establish a segregated training base. While this seemed reasonable to the Marine Corps, it was not an ideal location for African Americans. The poorest region of the country, the South was widely recognized as the most racially insensitive area whose rigid adherence to segregation made the daily plight of African Americans almost unbearable.<sup>12</sup> Jacksonville, NC, was no exception.

Racial tensions were high outside the gate, which forced many African Americans to bypass the town for more racially sensitive cities such as Wilmington and New Bern while on liberty.

As the Marine Corps embarked on their admittance of African Americans, General Holcomb, the current Commandant, established strict directives concerning where the service would concentrate its recruiting efforts. Of the 900 initially proposed, 500 would come from the South with the additional 400 coming from the Eastern and Central districts respectively. Consciously left out of the equation was the Western district of the United States. This omission was based on money. Holcomb believed that bringing in African Americans from the West would be too costly.<sup>13</sup> While this reasoning seemed valid in terms of a cost saving requirement, it hinted at Holcomb's overall dissatisfaction with being forced to allow African Americans in at all. Also, the rights and treatment of an African American out West compared to those in the South were vastly different. Bringing a recruit from the West to integrate with other African Americans from the more oppressive areas of the United States was of grave concern to some senior leaders. Fearful of creating civil unrest, this was just an additional reason not to bring in recruits from the Western half of the United States.

Citing a need to recruit the most qualified African Americans possible, the Marine Corps established a rigorous screening process.<sup>14</sup> In the beginning, meeting those stringent requirements was extremely challenging. While some African American recruits possessed high school and even college degrees, most had inferior schooling that left them at a severe disadvantage. This was only magnified by the difficult testing requirements initially established. In fact, "the number of voluntary enlistments of Black Marines was not up to the anticipated rate."<sup>15</sup> By the end of October, less than 600 of the anticipated 1200 were in training at Montford Point.<sup>16</sup> Concerns were evident among the recruiters about the obvious difficulties

surrounding the entrance aptitude exams. When one recruiter was questioned about the exams, he responded by saying that even a White male would have difficulty gaining entrance.<sup>17</sup>

In December 1942, just a few months after the arrival of the first all volunteer African American recruits, the United States discontinued voluntary enlistments in favor of the selective service system due to the increased manpower requirements caused by entrance into WWII. It was determined that the African American population would make up at least ten percent of those enlistees to be selected. This percentage was based on the total approximation of the population of African Americans within the United States.<sup>18</sup> This drastic increase in numbers made the ability to recruit and screen qualified African Americans very daunting. While the increase in numbers gave the perception it would provide better opportunities for advancement in the African American community, the Marine Corps quickly established a steward's branch in January of 1943 to be filled exclusively by African Americans.<sup>19</sup> This new branch helped absorb the influx of African American personnel while severely restricting their ability for advancement.

When recruiting these men for enlistment, the Marine Corps placed a heavy emphasis on finding individuals who wanted to be Marines. As the nation was just coming out of the Great Depression, there was no doubt that many of the enlistees were entering the Marine Corps due to the severe economic hardships of the time.<sup>20</sup> With this in mind, recruiters worked extremely hard to find those who wanted to serve exclusively in the Marine Corps.<sup>21</sup> Many of these young men had left other services to have the opportunity to become one of the first African American Marines. Individuals like Gilbert "Hashmark" Johnson, who became a pioneer as one of the first senior enlisted African American Marines, served in both the Army and the Navy before asking to join the Marine Corps.<sup>22</sup>

With the first graduates completing basic training by the end of 1942, they immediately began preparations for overseas duty. Planned initially to utilize the new Marines as an all defense battalion, with the increased number of African Americans due to the draft, “the Division of Plans and Policies eventually created fifty-one separate depot companies and twelve separate ammunition companies manned by Negroes.”<sup>23</sup> Ironically, these ammunition and depot companies were the units who saw battle during WWII. While their heroic actions led to praise from senior leaders, once they returned home from war, they were still restricted to specific roles already established by the Marine Corps.

#### What factors drove the Marine Corps to adopt the policy of segregation?

In July 1941, it was readily apparent that the Marine Corps was not prepared for racial integration and felt that this policy was being forced upon it. “There was no question but that the order was unpopular at Headquarters Marine Corps.”<sup>24</sup> The Marine Corp’s reluctance to change puzzled many civil rights leaders. “Whether this policy of racial exclusion reflected the high percentage of White southerners in the Corps’ ranks, the highest of any service, or the ideal of a small close-knit brotherhood of warriors, it was endorsed and defended by the Corps’ leadership.”<sup>25</sup> General Holcomb believed that African Americans did not have a right to demand a place in the Marine Corps.<sup>26</sup> In fact, in an interview when asked about the subject, he stated, “If it were a question of having a Marine Corps of 5,000 Whites or 250,000 Negroes, I would rather have the Whites.”<sup>27</sup> Additionally he stated, “The Negro race has every opportunity now to satisfy its aspirations for combat, in the Army-a very much larger organization than the Navy or Marine Corps-and their desire to enter the naval service is largely, I think, to break into a club that doesn’t want them.”<sup>28</sup> His blatantly racial stance set the tone for Marine Corps policy and

contributed extensively to the Corps' perceived lack of interest in enforcing this new directive. Almost immediately, its stance relied heavily on "a rigid insistence on racial separation and a willingness to work for equal treatment of Black troops."<sup>29</sup> While the appearance to work for racial equality through segregation was the party line, this was rarely the case. It was recognized throughout the Armed Services that the Marine Corps wanted to exhibit a perception of compliance with the Presidential Directive. Through the policy of segregation, the Marine Corps believed it could generate this perception while still maintaining a White dominated service whose senior leaders did not want to disrupt the status quo. In essence, senior leaders searched for a "way to inject the question of race into the Marine Corps as little as possible."<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that this behavior was not atypical at the time. The Army was still enforcing its policy on segregation. The Army Chief of Staff, General George Marshall, was an avid proponent of segregation and believed, "The settlement of vexing racial problems cannot be permitted to complicate the tremendous task of the War Department and thereby jeopardize the discipline and morale."<sup>31</sup> He, as well as many other senior leaders in the military, believed it was not the Armed Services responsibility to be a testing ground for racial equality.

The Department of the Navy had chosen a path for embracing African Americans into its service by electing to adopt a policy of full integration. By law, the Marine Corps falls under the Navy but was able to establish its own set of directives completely unconnected to its senior command.

By law, the Marine Corps was a component of the Department of the Navy, its commandant was subordinate to the Secretary of the Navy in such matters as manpower and budget to the Chief of Naval Operations in specified areas of military operations. In the conduct of ordinary business, however, the commandant was independent of the Navy's bureaus, including the Bureau of Naval Personnel. The Marine Corps had its own staff personnel officer, similar to the Army's G-1, and, more important for the development of the racial policy, it had a Division of Plans and Policies that was immediately responsible for the

manpower planning. At the same time, the letters and directives of the Chief of Naval Operations and the Chief of Naval Personnel implementing the secretary's order did not apply to the corps. In effect, the Navy Department imposed a racial policy on the corps, but left it to the commandant to carry out that policy as he saw fit.<sup>32</sup>

Capitalizing on this convoluted administrative structure, the Marine Corps effectively dismissed the directives of the Department of the Navy and formulated a vision very different from its senior authority.<sup>33</sup>

The Marine Corps believed it had a multitude of reasons to abstain from implementing integration. As the nation's smallest service, it viewed itself as too small to absorb such a large shift in cultural policy. Commandant Holcomb explained to one civil rights group, "Black enlistment was impracticable because the Marine Corps was too small to form racially separate units."<sup>34</sup> In forming separate units, the Marine Corps would be forced to duplicate both manpower requirements and facilities to satisfy the requirements set forth. Speaking before the General Board of the Navy, Holcomb stated "there would be a definite loss of efficiency in the Marine Corps if we take Negroes...."<sup>35</sup> The idea of additional facilities and duplicate personnel structure, would take away the scarce resources in which the Marine Corps was already critically short. In trying to emphasize his stance by removing the underlying issue of race, Holcomb indicated that after Pearl Harbor, the Marine Corps did not even have enough facilities to train White recruits.<sup>36</sup>

While additional facilities were one reason for opposing integration, the critical shortfall the Marine Corps was most concerned about was the increase in manpower requirements among the White Marines. Simply stated, the Marine Corps did not want to allocate the manpower needed to train the new African American recruits because "experienced noncommissioned officers were at a premium and diverting them to train a Black unit would be militarily

inefficient.”<sup>37</sup> While the Marine Corps aspired to move eventually to a position in which all African Americans were trained by their own race, this was not possible until they were able to generate enough African American Marines to sustain the training. Until then, a heavy reliance on White non-commissioned and commissioned officers was needed. In examining after action reports filed by the U.S. Army on its experience with racial integration, it was routinely emphasized that under the proper instruction by White leaders, African Americans can perform well.<sup>38</sup> The Marine Corps understood it had to screen and select the correct White Marines for the job. This process was exhaustive with respects to both time consumption and manpower requirements.

As previously stated, the lack of educational opportunities afforded to African Americans left them at a severe disadvantage in regards to preparation for the military. During this time in the nation’s history, the preponderance of states were operating under Jim Crow laws. While these laws were ostensibly in place to provide equal opportunities to African Americans, it was widely known throughout the country they were anything but equal. Described as “social ostracism,” these laws and customs “extended to churches and schools, to housing and jobs, to eating and drinking.”<sup>39</sup> Because of these laws, Army records<sup>39</sup> indicated that “a majority of Black recruits showed low levels of learning aptitude.”<sup>40</sup> Emphatically across all services, the lack of education severely restricted the pool of recruits that were able to pass the rigorous entrance requirements. While the lower scores of the African American population were of grave concern, the Marine Corps compounded the issue by enforcing its strict application of segregation. Because of segregation, those men who possessed a lower mental aptitude were all forced to operate in the same unit causing an overall decrease in unit effectiveness. “[U]nlike the low-scoring Whites who could be scattered throughout the corps’ units, [African Americans] had to

be concentrated in a small number of segregated units to the detriment of those units.”<sup>41</sup> In addition, those African American Marines who possessed the intellectual capabilities above their White counterparts were also forced to remain in segregated units, effectively underutilizing their potential.

Once these men became Marines, finding a geographical location for them to serve, both overseas and at home, also proved to be a difficult challenge. During WWII, disagreements were commonplace about where to locate these men. Many senior leaders were fearful of injecting African Americans into an area that was not sensitive to racial equality. For example, during WWII, the Polynesian area of the Pacific was an location the African Americans would not be allowed serve in.<sup>42</sup> Fearful of the African American Marines forming sexual relationships with the Polynesian women, Major General Charles F.B. Price “strongly urged therefore that any Black units deployed to the Pacific should be sent to Micronesia where they “could do no racial harm.”<sup>43</sup> These restrictions placed on African American Marines were not only costly to the Marine Corps in terms of operational efficiency, but also reaffirmed its stance on enforcing segregation. “Segregation meant it necessary to find assignments for a whole enlisted complement and placed an intolerable administrative burden on the Corps.”<sup>44</sup>

While tensions concerning the placement of African Americans at war were a concern, it became a greater problem once they returned home. Almost immediately, commanders from across the nation started to bombard Headquarters Marine Corps with excuses about why their base or post would not be a suitable option for stationing African Americans. Reasons ranged from the lack of adequate recreational facilities to fear of racial unrest in adjoining towns. Many of the small communities who were forced to deal with civil rights issues were not prepared to handle it. States and Federal laws concerning civil rights were often in opposition to each other,

which caused contention among the local population. Cities such as McAlester, Oklahoma, originally designated as an ammunition dump facility that would house an African American company, did not want them present. Local commanders viewed it as a nuisance they did not want to handle. “But even here there was a reason to question the motives of some local commanders, for during a lengthy discussion in the Personnel Department some officials asserted that the available evidence indicated no justification for restricting assignments.”<sup>45</sup> Lack of adequate facilities or civil unrest within the community was often used as a convenient excuse to mask the underlying racial issues believed by many commanders. Conversely, those areas that were more sensitive and accepting of racial equality also became witness to the unfortunate byproduct of segregation. “As the services continued to open bases throughout the country, they actually spread the federally sponsored segregation into areas where it had never existed with the force of law.”<sup>46</sup>

Due to the Marine Corps’ stance on segregation, it faced a serious challenge of maintaining a positive image in the eyes of the public. Typecast as a “Whites Only” organization, civil rights leaders were often at odds with the way the Marine Corps was handling integration. Civil rights leaders joined with the members of the African American press to demand equality in the military.<sup>47</sup> They instituted a campaign known as the “Double V” campaign, in which civil rights leaders were “demanding victory against fascism abroad and discrimination at home.”<sup>48</sup> The Marine Corps understood this problem and tried to stay ahead the situation. “Every possible step should be taken to prevent the publication of inflammatory articles by the Negro press. Such control is largely outside the province of the Marine Corps, but the Marine Corps can, by supplying the Negro press with suitable material for publication and offering them the cooperation of our Public Relations Division, properly encourage a better

standard of articles on the Negro in the military service.”<sup>49</sup> While not able to control the public press, the Marine Corps was able to control what stories it published. With the discovery of edited copies of the Camp Lejeune base newspaper, it was clearly evident that White Marines were editing and removing any words or phrases that could be considered as racially insensitive. Words such as “colored, brown or bronze men” were omitted in an effort to prevent racial incitement from members of the civil rights movement and the African American press.<sup>50</sup> In addition to the omission of racially insensitive terms, the Marine Corps was also reluctant to give praise to African American Marines. In an article titled “Negro Marines Observe Third Anniversary “ written in the spring of 1945, the author’s opening line read “It was the Negro Leathernecks’ gallant stand in the battle lines of Saipan, Guam, and Peleliu that evoked from General Alexander A. Vandergrift, Marine Corps Commandant recently the statement: ‘The Negro Marines are no longer on trail. They are Marines, period.’”<sup>51</sup> After editing, the phrase “gallant stand” was replaced with “accomplishments” with a note from the editor dated 25 May 1945 stating “No Negro Marines made a ‘gallant stand’ in the battle lines at Saipan, Guam and Peleliu”<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the discovery of a memorandum from the Division of Public Relations questioned whether General Vandergrift actually made the statement about African American Marines.<sup>53</sup>

At the conclusion of WWII, the movement regarding civil rights equality inside the military was quickly gaining momentum. Witnessing success on the battlefield by the heroic efforts of African Americans, it was becoming increasingly apparent to the Marine Corps that these men were more than qualified to be Marines. While this grass roots sentiment was becoming more popular within the lower ranks, the senior leaders within the Marine Corps still were not convinced that full integration was the best policy. “Complaints from civil rights

advocates abounded, but neither the protest nor the cost to military efficiency of duplicating training facilities were sufficient moment to overcome the sentiment against significant racial change, which was kept to a minimum.”<sup>54</sup> So why was the Marine Corps so adamant about retaining segregation? Most evidence points to the fact that racial harmony during WWII was relatively good. While there was sporadic reporting of racial incidents, for the most part, the senior leaders believed that segregation was working. “Judged in terms of keeping racial harmony, the Corps policy must be considered a success.”<sup>55</sup> In reality, it was the policy of segregation that kept this harmony. Without the races ability to interact with each other, civil unrest could undoubtedly be kept to a minimum.

While racial harmony during WWII was considered a success within the Marine Corps’ senior leadership, there was a general distrust growing amongst the African American Marines. Their treatment in wartime contributed significantly to a mass exodus of qualified African American Marines postwar. While a reduction in overall manpower requirements postwar was to be expected, the Marine Corps failed to retain many of the most qualified. Segregation was still being strictly enforced as the Marines returned home, which left them with very few options for advancement. “The prospect did not seem to have much appeal to the lower ranking Marine. Although a number of staff NCOs switched to the regular Marine Corps as a career man, only a trickle of PFCs, corporals and sergeants reenlisted.”<sup>56</sup> The inability to retain these men also affected the recruiting efforts of new enlistees.<sup>57</sup> Due to the Corps’ small size, this general distrust was difficult to confine to just one area. It was becoming rampant throughout the service. “The illusion of equal treatment and opportunity could be kept alive in the massive Army and Navy with their myriad of unit and military occupations; it was much more difficult to preserve the small and specialized Marine Corps.”<sup>58</sup>

African American civil rights leaders were disgusted with the lack of progress the Marine Corps was making towards integration. Failure to attain recruitment goals and an overall perceived lack of urgency towards the recruitment of African Americans left many civil rights advocates furious with the Marine Corps. As historian Morris MacGregor stated, “These rapid changes, indeed the whole pattern of Black enlistment in the postwar Marine Corps, demonstrated that the staff’s manpower practices were out of joint with the times. Not only did they invite attack from the increasingly vocal civil rights forces, but they also fostered a general distrust among Black Marines themselves and among those Negroes the Corps hoped to attract.”<sup>59</sup> The mass departure of the WWII Marines, coupled with the failure to attract young new recruits, left the Marine Corps with serious challenges in keeping the force combat ready.<sup>60</sup>

The lack of progress within the officer ranks was just as frustrating to many civil rights advocates. In 1945, three African American men were selected to attend Officer Candidate Course. Two of the men, Sergeant Major Charles F. Anderson and Sergeant Major Charles W. Simmons had college degrees. The third man, First Sergeant George F. Ellis Jr. was not a college graduate, but did have extensive experience overseas. In the end all three men failed to receive a commissioning. “One was given a medical discharge for a congenital heart murmur, [while] the other two failed to maintain the required military and scholastic rating, becoming a part of the 13 percent of the class that was not commissioned.”<sup>61</sup> Ironically, once these men left the Marine Corps, they went on to achieve great success in the civilian world. Charles Anderson became a lawyer. George Ellis became a physician and Charles Simmons went on to be a college professor and author.<sup>62</sup> While these men failed to become officers, they opened the door for future candidates. Only a few months later on 10 November 1945, Frederick C. Branch

became the first African American Officer when he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the reserve forces.<sup>63</sup>

What drove the policy changes from “separate but equal” towards full integration?

As the Marine Corps began to transition to the postwar period, many questions concerning integration were still left unanswered. Senior leaders seemed content with the current policy. A memorandum for the Commandant dated 13 May 1946 titled “Negro Personnel in the Postwar Marine Corps“ written by Director of Division of Plans and Policy confirmed the Marine Corps’ stance on segregation.

As far as the Marine Corps is concerned, it merely submitted as a fact that the maintenance of separate Negro units had been a satisfactory procedure for solving the Negro problem and, consequently, does not appear to dictate that need for such a radical trend as complete racial nondistinction. It is proposed, therefore, that the policy of supporting separate units for the assignment of Negro marines, be continued in the peacetime Marine Corps, and that the total number of Negroes in the Marine Corps be based on an established quota.<sup>64</sup>

The word choice of “racial trend” provides a keen insight to higher headquarters overall thinking. Based on after actions reports received from WWII, the senior leaders believed what they were doing were right for the Marine Corps. Being forced to change policy due to a “racial trend” seemed disruptive and unnecessary at the time. “Some Officers at Headquarters Marine Corps felt rather strongly that it was not the Marine Corps place to lead the fight against segregation.”<sup>65</sup> In essence, these officers felt the social transformation of America should occur in the civilian sector before being implemented into the Armed Services. In a memorandum from Headquarters Marine Corps dated 28 May 1946, General Cates stated:

It appears that the Negro question is a national issue which grows more controversial yet is more evaded as time goes by. During the past war the services were forced to bear the responsibilities of the problem, the solutions of which were often intended more to appease the Negro press and other ‘interested’

agencies than to satisfy their own needs. It is true that a solution to the issue was, and is, to entirely eliminate any racial discriminations within the services, and to remove such practices as separate Negro units, calling on the number of Negroes in the respective services, etc., but it appears that until the matter is settled at a higher level, the services are not required to go further than that which is already custom.<sup>66</sup>

Additionally Cates felt that “the National Military Establishment could not be an agency for experimentation in civil liberty without detriment to its ability to maintain the efficiency and high state of readiness so essential to national defense. The problem of segregation is not the responsibility of the Armed Forces but is a problem of the nation.”<sup>67</sup> While this stance was not well received by those demanding change, “Cates was only forcibly expressing a cardinal tenet common to all military services: the civil rights of the individual must be subordinated to the mission of the service.”<sup>68</sup> General Cates was only echoing the exact sentiments that George Marshall expressed prior to WWII. Conversely, civil rights advocates believed the Armed Forces were one of the best institutions for social change. As one of the nation’s largest employers of African Americans, the Armed Forces were seen as the logical choice to implement change. Civil rights proponents believed if they could achieve racial equality in the military, the civilian population would take notice and do the same.<sup>69</sup>

From the end of WWII until 1948 the Marine Corps continued to operate under its established segregated policy. While the Navy continued to move forward with a policy of full integration, the Marine Corps once again took a separate stance that was independent of its senior service. Ignoring Naval directives, “the Corps hoped to retain the Army’s segregation system without committing itself to a specific numerical quota or any notion of ‘separate but equal’ service.”<sup>70</sup> This remained in effect until 1948 with the signing of Executive Order 9981.

In 1948, President Truman was facing heavy pressure to institute change. Once again, a prominent leader in the civil rights movement was A. Phillip Randolph. Threatening another

march on Washington, he met with President Truman to discuss his concerns. “Truman met with Randolph, but stalked out of the meeting after Randolph declared, ‘I can tell you the mood among Negroes of this country is that they will never bear arms again until all forms of bias and discrimination are abolished.’”<sup>71</sup> Four months later on 26 July 1948, Truman signed Executive Order 9981. It stated, “That there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the Armed Services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.”<sup>72</sup> While a monumental achievement for the civil rights community, just like Executive Order 8802, the wording left implementation open to interpretation. “The vagueness was there by design. The failure to mention either segregation or integration puzzled many people and angered others, but it was certainly to the advantage of the President who wanted to give the least offense possible to voters who supported segregation.”<sup>73</sup> Additionally the Executive Order stated, “This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale.”<sup>74</sup> Without a specific date establishing full integration, it once again allowed the services to delay action.

In addition to the order, President Truman established the Fahy Committee. This committee, headed by former Solicitor General Charles Fahy, would be comprised of civil and military personnel who would be responsible for determining “how best to carry out the newly announced policy of equal treatment and opportunity.”<sup>75</sup> Understanding the complexity of this task, it took the committee almost a full year before finally submitting their recommendations. In the end, “the Fahy committee demonstrated conclusively that segregation and other forms of discrimination resulted in armed forces that were inherently inefficient.”<sup>76</sup>

It was quickly determined that each service had a particular agenda concerning how they were going to implement Executive Order 9981. For the U.S Air Force, arguably the most

racially advanced service, it believed that a gradual method of integration could be accomplished. The U.S. Navy also could accomplish this but would require more time for full integration. By far, the U.S. Army was the most defiant in establishing full integration. Still staunch proponents of segregation, the Fahy Committee wanted the Army to abolish its quota system and provide equal opportunity for schooling. The Army was skeptical of this concept and only conceded after “the President’s promise to repose racial quotas in case of a ‘disproportionate balance of racial strengths.’”<sup>77</sup>

The U.S. Navy was growing concerned about the Marine Corps’ interpretation of the new Executive Order. In June of 1949, the Navy issued a new policy regarding racial integration effectively stating that, “in their attitude and day-to-day conduct of affairs, officers and enlisted personnel of the Navy and Marine Corps shall adhere rigidly and impartially to the Navy Regulations, in which no distinctions made between individuals wearing the uniform.”<sup>78</sup> Once again, the Marine Corps portrayed a very non-compliant attitude in the application of this new directive. While the abolishment of segregated training at Montford Point that summer helped portray an image of embracing integration, it was only enacted because the Marine Corps finally understood the fiscal and manpower inefficiencies associated with a separate training facility. With less than twenty African American recruits a month arriving at Montford Point, it became too expensive, and on 1 July 1949, the Commandant ordered all African Americans be trained at Parris Island, South Carolina.<sup>79</sup> While this was seen as a step in the right direction, the Navy still was not satisfied with the Marine Corps’ implementation of its new policy.

After relenting to pressure from both the Fahy Committee and its senior service, the Marine Corps issued memorandum 119-49 on 18 November 1949. Within that memorandum, it established the following guidance; “(A) All previous statements of policy relating to Negro

Marines are revoked. (B) Organizations of platoon strength or larger comprised entirely of Negro enlisted personnel will continue and in the future will be designated, where appropriate, in both regular and reserve components. (C) Individual Negro Marines will be assigned in accordance with MOS to vacancies in any unit where their services can be effectively utilized.”<sup>80</sup>

Interesting enough, the Marine Corps still kept the prerogative to retain all segregated units where it deemed appropriate. While making advancements towards full integration, the Marine Corps still had the authority to retain those all segregated units as necessary. As Morris MacGregor noted, “For the service to reserve the right to restrict the assignment of Negroes when it was of ‘overriding interest to the Marine Corps’ was perhaps understandable, but it was also susceptible to considerable misinterpretation if not outright abuse.”<sup>81</sup> Additionally, the Commandant warned his subordinate leaders after the establishment of the new policy not to interpret it too broadly.<sup>82</sup>

As the Marine Corps entered the 1950’s it appeared it was “determined to retain its system of racially segregated units indefinitely.”<sup>83</sup> That changed when the United States found itself at war in the Summer of 1950 on the Korean peninsula. By August 1950, The 1<sup>st</sup> Provisional Marine Brigade was conducting combat operations at the Pusan Perimeter and became the first to integrate individual African Americans into combat units.<sup>84</sup> It was the Korean War that forced the Marine Corps to adopt full integration. Strictly in response to the manpower demand of the battlefield, the Marine Corps had to abandon its social policy.<sup>85</sup> Heavy combat losses and the requirement to meet critical shortfalls meant the Marine Corps could not sustain segregation. This war also marked the first time that an African American officer was in charge of a combat unit. After witnessing these integrated units in combat operations, the Commandant issued a study to determine how effective integration was. As a result, he

“announced a general policy of racial integration on 13 December 1951, thus abolishing the system first introduced in 1942 of designating certain units in the regular forces and organized reserves as Black units.”<sup>86</sup>

While the Marine Corps had essentially abolished segregation, it still was far from being fully integrated. Racism was still prevalent and the Marine Corps continued to place restriction on the assignments of African Americans into the early 1960s. “By June 1962 all restrictions on the assignment of Black marines had been dropped with the exception of several installations in the United States where off-base housing was unavailable and some posts overseas where the use of Black marines was limited because of the attitude of foreign governments.”<sup>87</sup> Finally, after twenty years, the Marine Corps was integrated.

“Progress towards equal treatment and opportunity in the armed forces was an uneven process, the result of sporadic and sometimes conflicting pressures derived from such constants in American society as prejudice and idealism spurred by a chronic shortage of military power.”<sup>88</sup> In essence, when the nation needed African Americans, they served faithfully. When they were not needed, they were cast aside.<sup>89</sup> For those African Americans that wore the uniform, they fought gallantly only to return home to be ostracized. For nearly two decades, the Marine Corps struggled with racial equality. As the smallest of all the services, the Marine Corps’ senior leaders remained adamant about its policy towards segregation, believing what they were doing was in the best interest of the Corps. Incorporating African Americans into the Marine Corps would cost too much money and jeopardize its warfighting capabilities. In reality, it was the Marine Corps’ strict stand on segregation that did just that. Inefficient training, duplicate manpower requirements, and an untold amount of money was spent to protect a policy that proved to be burdensome and archaic. In perpetually delaying the transition towards

integration, the Marine Corps not only did untold damage to its combat efficiency, but damage to its national image.

### Conclusion

The Marine Corps' struggle with racial equality is a cautionary lesson that can be applied today. Like the introduction of African Americans over 70 years ago, the Marine Corps is currently facing another cultural transformation that has divided the nation with the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." A staunch proponent of maintaining the status quo and keeping the ban in place, the Marine Corps once again argued that the repeal would degrade its warfighting capabilities. Under heavy criticism from pro-gay rights activists and the media, the Marine Corps remained firm on keeping the ban in place. On 22 July 2011, the ban was lifted allowing openly gay citizens to serve in the military. Once signed into law, the Marine Corps' implementation of the new policy was drastically different from its reaction 70 years ago. Instead of delaying the policy from taking effect, the Commandant immediately established directives to ensure the acceptance of homosexuals. It seems those lessons learned from the civil rights era were not lost on the current administration. By revisiting those lessons from the past, the Marine Corps ensured it was not doomed to repeat history.

The fight for racial equality within the Marine Corps was a long and arduous process. Filled with bigotry and injustice, the decisions made must be understood in the context of the time. The military has always been a microcosm of the American public and provides a genuine reflection of the nation it serves.<sup>90</sup> The nation was deeply divided in terms of racial equality. While those decisions viewed from a current prospective would be considered insensitive and intolerant, they were consistent with much of the nation during the civil rights movement.

As those restrictions were lifted, many great African Americans accepted the call to be Marines and led the way with great honor and pride. “They understand the significance of their victory over racism and the price they paid to achieve it.”<sup>91</sup> Their contributions to the advancement of civil rights and to our nation should be cherished and never forgotten.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Henry L. Shaw, Jr. and Ralph W. Donnelly. *Blacks in the Marine Corps*. (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 2002), IX.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard J Stillman II. *Integration of the Negro in the U.S. Armed Forces*. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968), 8.
- <sup>3</sup> Shaw and Donnelly, X.
- <sup>4</sup> Melton A. McLaurin. *The Marines of Montford Point. America's first black Marines*. (The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 4.
- <sup>5</sup> MacGregor, 7.
- <sup>6</sup> MacGregor, 7.
- <sup>7</sup> MacGregor, 7.
- <sup>8</sup> Brothers of the Sleeping Cars Porter is recognized as the first organized union for African Americans. See: MacGregor, 126.
- <sup>9</sup> Jack. D. Foner. *Blacks and the Military in American History*. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 141.
- <sup>10</sup> Executive Order 8802.
- <sup>11</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 2.
- <sup>12</sup> McLaurin, 7.
- <sup>13</sup> This was cited in a memo that he sent out to his General Officers. See: Morris J. MacGregor. *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965*. (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1981), 101.
- <sup>14</sup> In addition to the requirements in physical and mental aptitude, they were also required to have cooking experience. See: Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 5.
- <sup>16</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 5.
- <sup>17</sup> MacGregor, 102.
- <sup>18</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 10.
- <sup>19</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 10.
- <sup>20</sup> McLaurin, 23.
- <sup>21</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 10.
- <sup>22</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 6.
- <sup>23</sup> MacGregor, 108.
- <sup>24</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 1.
- <sup>25</sup> McLaurin, 5.
- <sup>26</sup> MacGregor, 100.
- <sup>27</sup> Bernard C. Nalty. *The Right to Fight: African American Marines in World War II*. (Washington, D.C.: Marines in World War II Commemorative Series, 1995), 1.
- <sup>28</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 1.
- <sup>29</sup> MacGregor, 105.
- <sup>30</sup> Bernard C. Nalty and Morris J. MacGregor. *Blacks in the Military Essential Documents*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1981), 56.
- <sup>31</sup> Stillman, 28.
- <sup>32</sup> MacGregor, 99.
- <sup>33</sup> MacGregor, 99.

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- <sup>34</sup> MacGregor, 100.  
<sup>35</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 1.  
<sup>36</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 1.  
<sup>37</sup> MacGregor, 101.  
<sup>38</sup> Nalty and McGregor, 160.  
<sup>39</sup> C. Vann Woodward. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 7.  
<sup>40</sup> Shaw and Donnelly, 2.  
<sup>41</sup> MacGregor, 104.  
<sup>42</sup> MacGregor, 111.  
<sup>43</sup> MacGregor, 111.  
<sup>44</sup> MacGregor, 265.  
<sup>45</sup> MacGregor, 468.  
<sup>46</sup> MacGregor, 12.  
<sup>47</sup> MacGregor, 126.  
<sup>48</sup> MacGregor, 17.  
<sup>49</sup> Nalty and MacGregor, 161.  
<sup>50</sup> See Appendix A.  
<sup>51</sup> See Appendix A.  
<sup>52</sup> See Appendix A.  
<sup>53</sup> See Appendix A.  
<sup>54</sup> MacGregor, 111.  
<sup>55</sup> MacGregor, 112.  
<sup>56</sup> Shaw and Donnelly, 49.  
<sup>57</sup> MacGregor, 258.  
<sup>58</sup> MacGregor, 103.  
<sup>59</sup> MacGregor, 261.  
<sup>60</sup> MacGregor, 259.  
<sup>61</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 47.  
<sup>62</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 48.  
<sup>63</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 48.  
<sup>64</sup> Nalty and MacGregor, 205.  
<sup>65</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 54.  
<sup>66</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 49.  
<sup>67</sup> Shaw Jr. and Donnelly, 54.  
<sup>68</sup> MacGregor, 336.  
<sup>69</sup> MacGregor, 17.  
<sup>70</sup> Nalty and MacGregor, 203.  
<sup>71</sup> Eric Freedman, Eric and Steven A. Jones. *African Americans in Congress: An Documentary History*. (Washington, DC: CG Press, 2008), 190.  
<sup>72</sup> Executive Order 9981.  
<sup>73</sup> MacGregor, 312.  
<sup>74</sup> Executive Order 9981.  
<sup>75</sup> Nalty and MacGregor, 243.  
<sup>76</sup> Nalty and MacGregor, 243.

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- <sup>77</sup> Nalty and MacGregor, 244.  
<sup>78</sup> Policy number 49-447, Nalty and MacGregor, 253.  
<sup>79</sup> MacGregor, 334.  
<sup>80</sup> Nalty and MacGregor, 302.  
<sup>81</sup> MacGregor, 467.  
<sup>82</sup> MacGregor, 467.  
<sup>83</sup> MacGregor, 462.  
<sup>84</sup> MacGregor, 463.  
<sup>85</sup> MacGregor, 463.  
<sup>86</sup> MacGregor, 464.  
<sup>87</sup> MacGregor, 468.  
<sup>88</sup> MacGregor, 1.  
<sup>89</sup> Stillman, 21.  
<sup>90</sup> Foner, IX.  
<sup>91</sup> McLaurin, 178.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE.

NEGRO MARINES OBSERVE  
THIRD ANNIVERSARY

BY MARINE SERGEANT L. A. WILSON  
(800 Dunbar Court,  
Orlando, Florida.)

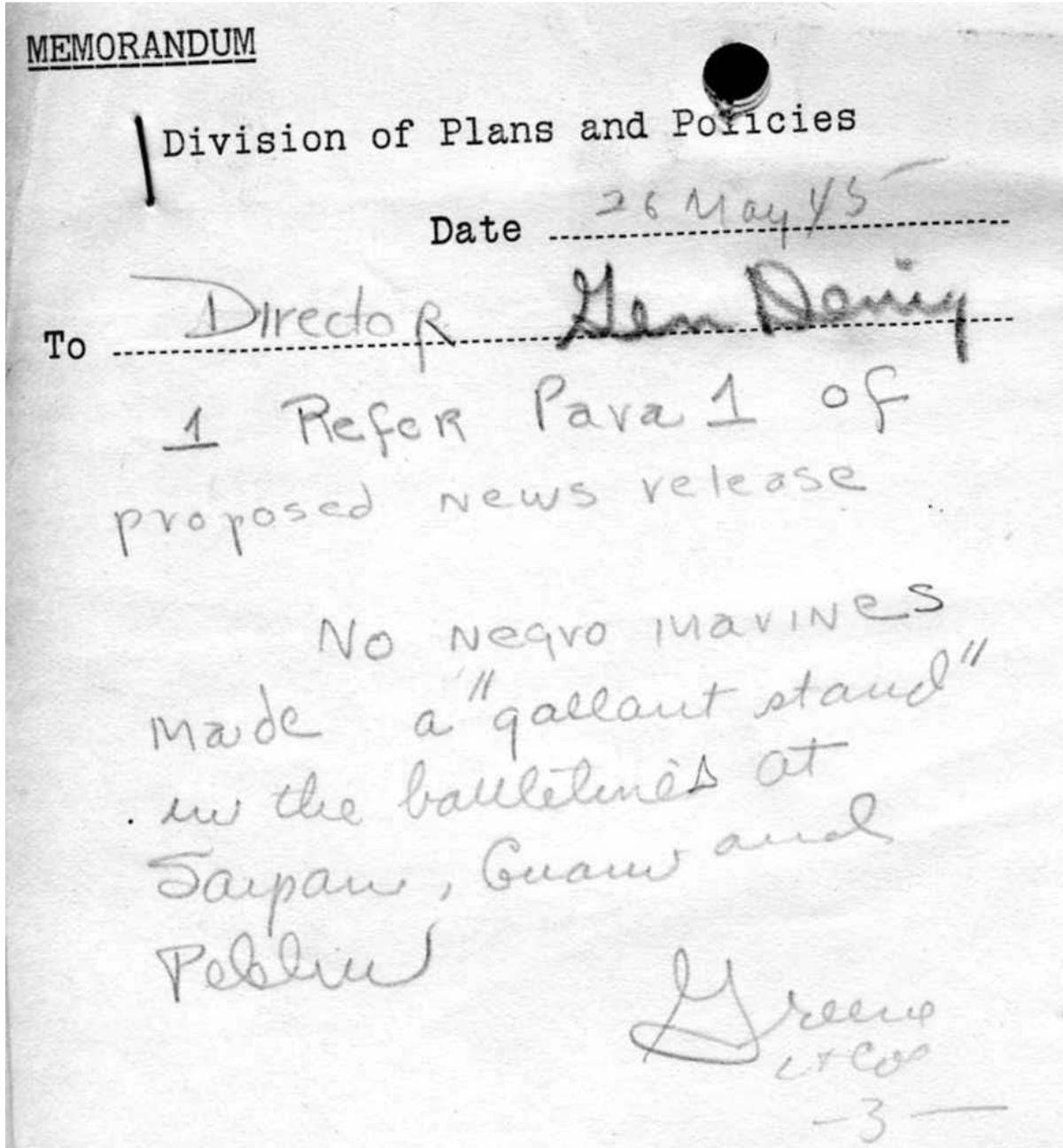
*negro*  
*file*  
*Sejams*

CAMP LEJEUNE, N.C. -- It was Negro Leathernecks' <sup>accomplishments</sup> ~~gallant stand in the battle-~~  
~~lines at Saipan, Iwo, and Okinawa~~ <sup>in the Marianas</sup> that evoked from General Alexander A. Vandegrift, Marine Corps Commandant ~~recently~~, the statement: "The Negro Marines are no longer on trial. They are Marines, period." ~~To win that commendation, Negro "Devil Dogs" proved without question that they could engage and destroy Hirohito's best in combat.~~

This precedent setting bravery of <sup>Negro Marines</sup> ~~Colored men~~ in the 169-year old Corps was made in June, 1944, approximately two years after the first volunteer began active duty.

June 1/ and August 26, 1942, are two dates, especially the latter, which <sup>Negro</sup> ~~brings~~ Marines will long remember. June 1/ is thought of as the anniversary of their initial recorded entrance to the Corps. August 26, 1942, when a contingent of 13 out of 23 recruits reported for active duty here at Montford Point Camp -- the only <sup>Negro</sup> ~~Colored~~ training center -- is the paramount date. It marks the actual Third Anniversary of Negro Marines.

An impressive saga is that of <sup>Negro</sup> ~~Brown~~ Marines' continual rise in the Fighting Corps. At 1201 June 1, 1942, Marine Staff Sergeant Alfred Masters, of 511 North Rhode Island Street, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, won the honor of being the first <sup>Negro</sup> ~~Colored~~ man to enlist in the Marine Corps. Of interest is the fact that on the same date that he enlisted, Montford Point Camp was authorized as the training station for <sup>Negro</sup> ~~Brown~~ Leathernecks. Staff Sergeant Masters is now serving overseas with a Marine defense battalion.



Note the remarks concerning the phrase "gallant stand" with respect to African Americans. Reference Page 27 on how the phrase was edited prior to publishing.



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