Montford Point Marine from New Orleans receives Congressional Gold Medal

By Paul Purpura, The Times-Picayune  Monday, September 10, 2012, 4:21 PM

As an 18-year-old Catholic high school student growing up in New Orleans while World War II raged overseas, Winston Burns Sr. beat the government to the punch and followed his older brother to the Marine Corps instead of waiting for the inevitable Army draft. He enlisted in January 1943 and was sent to Montford Point, N.C., to a Marine Corps camp created to train the African-American recruits that the Corps was under presidential executive order to accept.

Burns had no idea he’d be going into a segregated Marine Corps, or, unlike his white counterparts who trained at Parris Island, S.C., that he would not even be recognized as a Marine. “We were able to survive all the things that they were doing,” he said of the second-class treatment. “Being bitter was not going to do you any good.”

Burns is one of about 20,000 African-Americans who endured boot camp at Montford Point, part of an exclusive group known historically as Montford Point Marines. Only about 420 such veterans are known to survive. On Monday, like nearly all of his surviving counterparts, Burns, 87, was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest award the legislative branch bestows -- recognition that Marine Corps Commandant Gen. James Amos said is “long overdue and richly deserved.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Burns told the audience gathered in the Marine Corps Support Facility New Orleans’ auditorium, filled mostly with Marines wearing desert combat uniforms; his wife of 52 years, Gretta; family; and four fellow Montford Point Marines. “I never dreamed in my life that I’d see all these Marines looking at me.”

Marine Forces Reserve’s commander Lt. Gen. Steven Hummer and Command Sgt. Maj. Eric Kuhns presented Burns the medal. “He is an honored member of his community in all respects,” Hummer said of Burns, who was a mentor for scores of New Orleans youths as a teacher and football and track coach at Carter G. Woodson Junior High School and Booker T. Washington High School before retiring after 25 years with the public school system and starting a second career at the city’s Juvenile Court system.

U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-La., said the recognition is overdue from an “imperfect country” that did not afford him the honor.

“This is not just black history or Marine Corps history, but part of American history,” said Master Gunnery Sgt. Ronald Johnson, president of the Montford Point Marine Association Granville Alexander chapter in New Orleans. About 15 Montford Point Marines are known to still be living in Louisiana, he said.

From its birth in 1775 until 1942, the Marine Corps would not accept African-Americans, until after President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered they be accepted in 1941. Montford Point was in use from 1942 to 1949, the year President Harry Truman issued an executive order integrating the military.

Burns said his older brother, Leonard Burns, a doctor who has since died, joined the Marines, leading him to do the same. Burns hoped to become a tank driver but instead was given a machine gunner job, he said after the award ceremony. “At that time, you had to do what you had to do,” he said. After bootcamp, he returned to New Orleans to participate in his graduation ceremony at Xavier University Preparatory High School. He remained in the Marines as a reservist after World War II, and was recalled to active duty in 1951 for the Korean War. He left the Marines as a sergeant.

Steadying himself with a cane Monday, he stood before the audience and deflected attention away from himself. “I want to thank all you young Marines out there who are protecting our country,” he said, concluding his remarks with the Marines’ motto “Semper Fi,” Latin for Always Faithful.