

SgtMaj Edgar R. Huff

Paving The Way

"...There I am—holes in my shoes, a measly quarter in my pocket, I'm hundreds of miles from home. I had worn those same clothes for about five days, so I'm smelling bad. I'm wearing my last clean set of drawers and he's (the DI) telling me that things are going to get worse? How much worse could they get?"

Story by Tom Bartlett

Photos courtesy of
SgtMaj Edgar R. Huff, USMC (Ret)

As a Marine staff sergeant in 1968, I was ordered to write a personality piece on Sergeant Major Edgar R. Huff for the Third Marine Amphibious Force newspaper, *Sea Tiger*, in Vietnam. I had done a similar story on Sergeant Percy Price, a popular black Marine Corps heavyweight boxer.

The sergeant major looked up at me from behind his desk. "Let me get this straight. You want to do a story on me because I am a black sergeant major?"

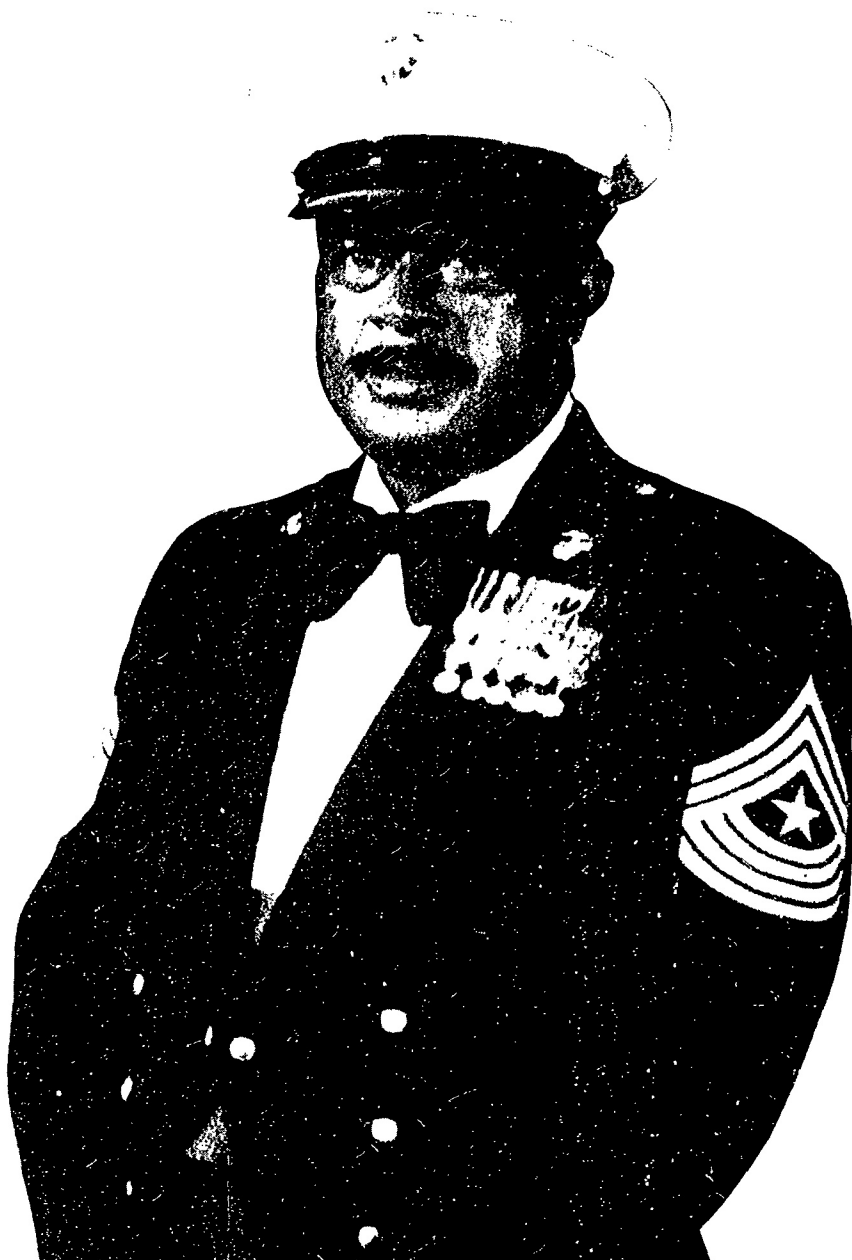
"Yes, sir."

"Get out of my office, NOW!"

Two weeks later, he called and apologized. "I've given it some thought. Maybe it is a good idea. The Marine Corps is changing, and I can see where you're coming from more clearly than when you initially proposed the story. . . ."

But I was intimidated, not only by his rank and his abrupt manner, but also by his size. He carefully avoided some questions, and when I repeated them, he simply ignored them. He "steered" the interview, saying what he wanted and smoothly repeating Marine Corps and III MAF policy pertaining to racial equality.

That was 20 years ago. I'm still white and he's still black, but we're both civilians, and I no longer fear his rank, ab-



Sergeant Major Edgar R. Huff retired on September 30, 1972, after completing 30 years as a Marine. He served with 2/1 in Korea, and was awarded a Bronze Star and Purple Heart in Vietnam.

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rupt manner or size. (He's still big, but has had a leg amputated, and I figured I could run faster on my two good legs than he could on one good leg and a plastic one.)

But at a recent interview, he still maintained Marine Corps and III MAF policy. He explained that if he answered all my questions, it might hurt the Marine Corps' recruiting of black applicants.

Exasperated, I tried to explain my feelings. "Sergeant Major, if today's blacks don't understand the way things were, they won't appreciate the way things are. And today's whites know very little about what you and the other Montford Point Marines had to go through before putting on the globe and anchor."

He sat silent, just staring at me. He must have stared for a full half-minute. Then his eyes dropped to his lap, and that giant of a man straightened in his

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And this is his story.

I was born in Gadsden, Ala., on December 2, 1919. My father, Edgar R. Huff the senior, had served in the Army as a corporal during World War I. He worked in the intelligence section with communications. He was fluent in the Creek (Indian) language and he and others would talk back and forth in Creek so the Germans wouldn't understand what was being said.

He was physically incapacitated as the result of a mustard gas attack, so my mother, Emily Lee Huff, had to work extra hard as a domestic (maid and cook) making \$3.50 a week. I started high school. I was going to be the first member of my family to get a "good" education, but in 1935, my father died.

Then my mother got awful sick, and she had to quit her job. That meant that I had to quit studying and become the breadwinner for the family. I got a job at a nearby steel mill. I had to lie about my age, but I was big, about 6-foot-5, and I weighed

ed a little over 200. At first, the foreman didn't want to hire another "nigger" because jobs were tough and whites needed work, too.

But I explained that my mother was sick and needed an operation. I might have cried some, but whatever, he gave me work. Fortunately, the company had a health insurance plan, so we rushed my mother to the hospital, where she got her operation.

I was working 11 hours a day for 20 cents an hour. I'd get up, dress and walk 2½ miles to work. Work in a steel mill is hard, but I needed that \$2.20 a day. I was thankful for the job and the money, and around 10 or 11 at night, I'd walk 2½ miles back



As a corporal drill instructor in 1943, Huff was authorized to carry "a stick like a pick handle." He claims he never used it, but it worked as a motivator, nonetheless.

home. Bus fare was a nickel, but I didn't want to spend a dime a day, so I walked.

I worked in that steel mill for nearly seven years. Then the war started, and the foreman came to me and explained that if blacks could pass a test, they could enlist in the Marine Corps. The foreman had been a Marine in World War I, and he said he thought I'd be a good Marine.

The recruiting office was at Sixth and Broadway in the post office. I told my mother what I intended to do, and she said, "No!" That was the first time in my life that I disobeyed my mother.

The recruiter was a corporal with a red stripe down his blue pant legs.

Naturally, he was white. When I walked in, he glanced up and said, "Boy, what do you want?" And I said, "I want to enlist." And he got sarcastic. "What makes you think you could be a Marine? What makes you think any of you people could be Marines? The Marines are tough!"

And I said, "Yes, sir. But I'm tougher." And that got his attention, so he gives me the written test, and I pass. And he sends me to Birmingham for a physical, and I pass. And the recruiter sends me home and tells me to wait until I hear from the government. On October 10, 1942, I received a train ticket and a meal ticket for New River, N.C.

The train pulled into Jacksonville, and I was met by a white sergeant driving a truck. There were four or five other blacks that had come in on the train with me. We got off the train and began climbing into the truck and the sergeant says, "What the hell do you niggers think you are doing?" He wouldn't let us on the back of the truck. He says, "Follow me!" and we ran all the way because we weren't Marines and therefore couldn't ride on one of their trucks.

The Marine Corps, as an organization, began enlisting blacks on June 25, 1942. But enlisting blacks and accepting them were two different things.

We arrived at what would later be called "Montford Point." Blacks from all walks of life and from all over the United States began arriving to train to become Marines. Some had been college students; some had been Army Reserve officers who had resigned their commissions to become enlisted Marines. More than 75 percent had some college education, and then there were others, like me, with a 10th grade education.

On our second night in boot camp, the white NCOs scrambled us out of our huts around one in the morning. We had to stand, at attention, in our skivvy shorts. They yelled at us, right up in our faces. They kept us there for hours, and we were darkmeat for the mosquitoes who had a field day on us.

Now remember my background. I was now a Marine recruit and, for the first time in my life, I was eating three good meals a day. The huts we lived in had electric lights. We had running water with an inside toilet and shower. And they gave me hats, dress uniforms, working clothes, a



(LEFT) The legendary Gilbert "Hashmark" Johnson. (ABOVE) The first six black drill instructors included PFC "Hashmark" Johnson, fourth from left, and PFC Edgar Huff, extreme right. (BELOW) 1stSgt Huff, center rear, led the first black Marines into China in 1945.

comb, a toothbrush, toothpaste and soap.

I had come to North Carolina with only the clothes on my back and my last pair of drawers on my butt. The soles of my shoes had holes in them, so I put cardboard in them so my feet wouldn't get wet.

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Over the next couple of days, more blacks reported in, and soon we formed the 9th Platoon. One day, right after evening chow, we met our drill instructor. He didn't pull any punches. "The best thing *you people* can do is sneak out of here after the lights go out. Go back home. Nobody'll miss you. Hell, no one knows you're here. Why try to play on a ball team that doesn't want you? But, if you decide to stay, I tell you this. You'll be sorry."

He's telling me this, and there I am—holes in my shoes, a measly quarter in my pocket, I'm hundreds



of miles from home. I had worn those same clothes for about five days, so I'm smelling bad. I'm wearing my last clean set of drawers and he's telling me that things are going to get worse? How much worse could they get?

After the drill instructor left and the lights went out, a bunch jumped out of bed and began packing their gear. There were three huts of us blacks, with 16 to each hut. They asked if I was going with them. "I ain't going. No damned way. I left

home to serve my country. I ain't leaving unless I'm in a pine box. I'm going to stay and take whatever they dish out."

Well, nobody left, and I think that's because two other large blacks, B. B. Roberts and a man named Cooper, sided with me. They were *big!* What we said, in effect, was if you want to leave, it'll be through us!

The next morning, the white sergeant blew his whistle and we all came pouring out of our huts. That white man was astonished, but he re-

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gained his composure quickly. Drill instructors back then carried a stick like a pick handle, and he wasn't afraid of whacking us on the head or jabbing our bellies.

We quickly learned one thing. He was right. He was making us sorry that we'd stayed. But I kept telling myself, "Dammit, he made it and so can I." I had to prove that a black man could be as good a Marine if given the chance, and I proved it to myself and to the Marine Corps.

We were called many things back then. "Hey, you," or "colored," or "you people," or "nigger." I wanted to change all that and be called, "Marine."

Those white drill instructors tried their best to run us off, but they couldn't. We suffered indignities and got whumped and shouted at. I know, I know. You're going to tell me that recruit training for whites was rough, too. I know that.

But there was a big difference in

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the attitude of many white drill instructors toward us blacks than white drill instructors toward white recruits. Some of those drill instructors grew up believing blacks were a lower cast of humanity.

The Marine Corps assigned white drill instructors who *least* disliked blacks. We didn't seek preferential treatment, but we did want *fair* treatment.

I remember my first Christmas in the Marine Corps. It cost me \$15 to take a bus to Alabama to see my mother over the holidays. I remember Second Lieutenant Morris Snead got me my money for the trip. Well, I got off the bus to stretch a bit in Atlanta, Ga., and two white Marine military policemen approached, saying, "There ain't no niggers in our Marine Corps!" They charged me with impersonating a Marine. I showed them my leave papers, which they claimed were forged. They locked me up. On Christmas Day, I was on

trash run, in Marine uniform. I stayed in jail until December 28th, when a representative of the Sixth Marine Corps District came down and got me out. I caught a cotton truck and made it home in time for New Year's.

After graduating from boot camp, a bunch of us headed into Jacksonville on liberty. Well, the sight of hundreds of us blacks in Marine greens scared the hell out of the locals, and they closed shop. They even closed the bus station, and that meant we couldn't catch rides to go to Wilmington, New Bern or Kinston, which were larger towns with larger black populations and black businesses. Colonel Samuel A. Woods (Montford Point camp commander) heard of the uproar in J'ville and ordered all his trucks into town, where they picked the black Marines up and drove them to various liberty towns. The trucks waited until nighttime, and then rounded us up for the return trip to camp.

Col Woods was a good man. He was white, but that didn't matter. He treated every one of us fairly; color meant nothing to him.

I came into the Marine Corps with a 10th grade education, but I knew I wanted better, so every night, after lights out, I'd go into the head (toilet/shower facility) and read books until one or two in the morning. I read everything I could get my hands on.

Because of the resentment some white Marines had toward blacks in boot camp, I did all I could to dispel imagined theories concerning blacks. Some thought we were all lazy, so I worked doubly hard to show that all of us were not lazy. Some said we smelled, so I showered and changed uniforms two or three times a day. Some called us "dumb niggers," so I read everything I could.

The first time I ever heard a bugle, it was "Taps," and that meant "lights out" for most. I didn't know the true meaning of that haunting melody until many years later, during a military funeral.

More than 20,000 black recruits enlisted during the early 1940s. Montford Point consisted of 120 prefabricated huts, including 20 which housed 16 men each. There were also two warehouses, a theater, chapel, dispensary and headquarters. Col Samuel Woods' staff consisted of 23 white officers and 90 white enlisted Marines.

If a black made it through recruit training, a black could march through hell singing a song. There were two Marine Corps back then—a white Corps and a black Corps. We were experimental. The Marine Corps was trying to decide if blacks could hack it. We blacks were trying to prove we could.

As blacks graduated, they were tested, selected and trained in a variety of fields. Many failed, but many survived. Some were trained as ad-



(ABOVE) In 1951, SgtMaj Huff had his first experience in an integrated company. He was a company gunnery sergeant with 2/1. (BELOW) Huff met with "Hashmark" Johnson, who served as an advisor to the Korean Marines.



ministrators. Others were trained in radar, gunnery, motor transport, and some, like me, were selected to train as drill instructors. Recruits began arriving so rapidly that blacks began training blacks.

I made PFC (private first class) and was singled out as an "Acting Jack," which meant that I assisted white drill instructors. There was a shortage of white instructors, and by selecting blacks to instruct blacks, it helped develop potential black NCOs. Eventually we took over from the

whites, and we began kicking ass and taking names, but we never used the stick. Our platoons at that time consisted of 32 recruits.

In April 1943, I was promoted to corporal. I made sergeant in July, and staff sergeant in December. In July 1944, I was acting as first sergeant. My quick promotions caused some animosity among some whites. Many Marines, blacks and whites, enlisted, went overseas and fought and maybe bled, and returned to the States for discharge, and they were still a private or PFC.

Many of the blacks got discharged from the Marine Corps and went to college under the GI Bill, and they became physicians, lawyers and so forth. Teachers, too. They sent their sons and daughters to colleges, and many came into the Marine Corps. Today, they are lieutenants, pilots and even an astronaut!

Oh, I tell you. We were so damned proud to be Marines, and we marched to our own band. We had our own church choir and our baseball and basketball teams. And we wore the globe and anchor proudly. We got it the old-fashioned way; we *earned* it, over and over again.

The last black units trained at Montford Point were Platoons 573, 574 and 575. In September 1949, Montford Point was deactivated as the recruit depot for black Marines. More than 12,735 blacks had served their Corps and country overseas during World War II.

Seems like I've been a Marine since God created a black in the Marine Corps. I never dreamed what I'd have to go through to become a Marine. We had to prove and reprove ourselves every time we were transferred. But I'd do it again if I could be assured that the results would be

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as gratifying, with the changes that took place within the Marine Corps.

But you know, prejudice didn't end with recruit training. I remember one time being in charge of a bus load of white Marines, and it was getting on to noon chow. I told the bus driver to pull into a restaurant.

We got off the bus and went inside. All the whites settled down and ordered, but nobody came near me. That was in North Carolina in the mid-'50s. Then a man came up to me and said, not whispered or anything like that. . . . He said, "We don't serve no *niggers* in here."

Well, I didn't want any trouble, so I just got up and went on back to the bus. One of the white Marines saw and figured out what happened, and he brought me out a sandwich and a soda or something.

During World War II, early on, blacks were used to load and unload supplies into combat zones while the whites did the fighting. Otherwise, whites would have to fight and unload supplies, and that would



Col G. R. Newton promoted Huff to first sergeant at MB, Port Lyautey on December 30, 1955. The next day, the colonel promoted Huff to sergeant major.

mean taking the whites from the lines. As the war progressed, blacks engaged the enemy at Tinian, Saipan, Guam, Peleliu and Iwo Jima. The largest number of blacks participated in the Battle of Okinawa.

In September 1945, I was sent to Tientsin, China, with the 7th Field Depot Regiment. We rode coal cars from the mines to prevent the Communists from derailing the trains or stealing the coal. The Chinese would come out and just stare at us. After a while, they'd rub their hands on our faces to see if the black would come off. They thought we had million dollar tans from the tropics.

In China, whites and blacks were serving together; we drank from the

same canteen cups and played ball together. We developed a fellowship overseas, but the war was over, and when we came home, blacks faced restrictions. We went to Negro camps and we had to remain in camp. We weren't allowed to visit or socialize

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with white friends in white camps.

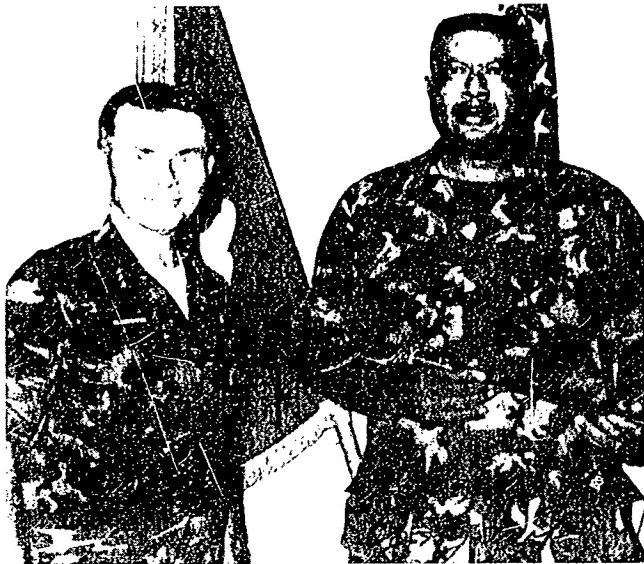
When we blacks returned to the United States, we arrived on the West Coast and had to go to Montford Point for discharge. We took a troop train, all 300 or 400 of us, all blacks. Many were then discharged and had to take the train back to their homes on the West Coast.

A dozen of us master sergeants were included on an ALMAR (All Marine directive), published by Headquarters Marine Corps saying that we'd have to go to school to become stewards. We got together, all 12 of us, and told our commanding officer that if we were good enough to go overseas and fight as Marines or work as specialists in our assigned fields, then we'd be damned if we'd become stewards. And we stood by for our discharges. But you know, the word soon came back allowing us to remain in our assigned fields.

I was winding up a tour with the Second Marine Division at Camp Lejeune in 1955, when General Lewis ("Chesty") Puller recommended me for the warrant officer's program. He was my idol. But I turned it down. If I'd have completed the program and graduated, I'd have become the Marine Corps' first black warrant officer.

But I'd just had a house built, and it cost me \$100 a month. If I'd accepted the warrant officer program, I could have gone up to lieutenant colonel before retiring. It was a wonderful opportunity, and I was so proud to have been recommended, especially by Gen Puller himself, but I couldn't accept, financially. I would have taken a cut in pay and we might have lost our house.

I'm not sorry. Remaining enlisted kept me closer to enlisted Marines. Had I made warrant officer, they'd



SgtMaj Huff worked for LtGen Keith McCutcheon in Vietnam in 1970. He also served a tour in Vietnam with the 1st MP Battalion, earning the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart.



PAVING THE WAY (cont.)

have put me in a broom closet someplace. I could do more for my Corps and my troops as a sergeant major.

In Korea, I served a tour with the First Marine Division. (He was gunnery sergeant of Weapons Company, 2/1 in 1951.) It was a "zebra" platoon—all white staff NCOs and me, but I couldn't have been treated any better than I was. After I joined the unit, I decided the best thing for me to do was have a formation and let them all see the monster they'd heard about. I explained to them that I was the company gunny and I wanted them to know, in no uncertain terms, that I was the gunny and not the figurehead, but the *gunny*, and they understood that.

Being one of the Marine Corps' senior enlisted Marines did not protect Huff from the enemy he'd fought all his life: prejudice. . .

I checked into the Marine Barracks, Port Lyautey, French Morocco, on a Friday noon in 1955. I was going to work for Col George R. Newton. I went to my assigned quarters and straightened out some gear, and then walked over to the chow hall. I got my tray of food and

walked into the staff NCO mess. I picked out a table and sat. The staff NCOs just glared at me for a couple of minutes, and then they all got up, walked over to the trash cans, and dumped their chow, cups, silverware and glasses into the garbage. They were all white.

The weekend went by, and not a single staff NCO talked to me. In fact, on Monday morning, when the colonel walked in and said, "Good morning, Sergeant Huff," it scared the hell out of me because it was the first talk I'd heard all weekend.

I was promoted to first sergeant on December 30, 1955. The next day, I was promoted to sergeant major. (Huff was on the first list of those selected to the new pay grades E-8 and E-9.) As I waited to take over the bar-

racks, I started receiving notes slipped under the door. "Turn down sergeant major position or die." Meanwhile, the acting sergeant major was told to move his gear out of my new office. The white master sergeant had been acting sergeant major. "Well," he told the colonel, "I'm a senior Marine Corps staff NCO, and I'll retire before I work for a nigger!"

Col Newton played it real cool. "Very well," the colonel said. "Pack your gear. You're going home to retire."

I wasn't the type to sit with my butt in an office chair. In Vietnam, I went out on sweeps with CAP (Combined Action Platoon) units and with the 1st Military Police Battalion, letting those young enlisted Marines know that their sergeant major



SgtMaj Huff is a Grand Inspector General of the 33rd Degree and was elevated to membership in the United Supreme Council, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, Prince Hall Affiliation, for the southern jurisdiction of the U.S.



In 1955, General Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller recommended SgtMaj Edgar Huff for the warrant officer's program. Huff turned it down. In addition to his desire to "be in the trenches with the troops," he'd have lost \$100 a month in pay.

cared, and that they were somebody. And when it got dark at night and we hunkered down to man defensive positions, we could talk, man-to-man, Marine to Marine, and my Marines knew they could talk to me. They knew I listened and they knew I cared.

A story comes to mind from his service as sergeant major, III Marine Amphibious Force, Da Nang, Vietnam. Huff served as the senior enlisted man of the largest Marine Corps force ever assembled in war time. A group of enlisted Marines was filling sandbags and erecting a fortified bunker inside the main camp. The headquarters had been subjected to enemy rocket and mortar attacks. It was mid-afternoon, and hot. A Marine gunny in neatly pressed uniform and spit-shined combat boots strolled out of his quarters, carefully remaining in the shade of a nearby admin office. Spotting the group of hard-working, sweating men, the gunny joked: "Move it out, Marines. Build that bunker so if the VCs hit, I'll be safe and sound. Now, if you guys were a gunny, like me, you could take a break and have a nice cool soda, like me, and lounge around in spit-shined

boots that mamasan slaved over.

SgtMaj Huff witnessed the exchange and charged outside. "Gunny, come here," the senior enlisted Marine belted. No one could hear the conversation between SgtMaj Huff and the gunny, but the gunny's face turned a crimson red and he loudly said, "Aye, aye, Sergeant Major," and ran off to his quarters. Shortly thereafter, the gunny returned in PT gear to join the sweating Marines, helping them construct the bunker. The sergeant major returned to his office with just a hint of a smile. "Nobody hassles my Marines," he said.

Sergeant Major Edgar R. Huff retired on September 30, 1972, after serving 30 years as a Marine.

But the Huff Marine Corps story may not be complete.

My son, Edgar Huff II, is a nurse at the Memorial Hospital. He became a Master Mason recently. I've been a Mason for 38 years and I've gone as far as I can go. And I have a grandson, Edgar Huff III, who is 3 years old.

I hope I live long enough to see him as an officer of Marines. . . .

(Today there are 1,033 black officers and 37,282 black enlisted Marines serving Corps and country. February is "Black History" month.)

I owe the Marine Corps for just about everything I have today. I had 25 cents in my pocket when I enlisted, and damned little else. Today, I have a nice car, a nice home. About the only thing the Marine Corps

"I owe the Marine Corps for just about everything I have today. I had 25 cents in my pocket when I enlisted, and damned little else. . . . I'm 70 years old, now. Life has been good."

didn't give me was Beulah M. McCaskill. That's my wife. We've been married 42 years. She is the twin sister of Eulah, who married Gilbert "Hashmark" Johnson for whom Camp Johnson (formerly Montford Point) is named.

I'm 70 years old, now. Life has been good. I feel that if one of your parts wears out, you get a new one. You can get a wooden leg, metal hip socket, artificial heart, steel knee cap. . . hell, you don't worry about growing old. All you have to worry about is getting rusty!

My final question to SgtMaj Edgar R. Huff was: "Weren't you accused of being an 'Oreo' at times?" (An "Oreo" is a cookie—black on the outside and white on the inside, meaning that the accuser believed the sergeant major kowtowed to whites, ignoring fellow blacks.)

"I heard that said, once, but that's not true. If you want to compare me to a cookie, call me a 'Grasshopper,' which is mint flavored and is brown on the outside and Marine green on the inside. That's what I think I am—Marine green on the inside. The outside doesn't matter to a Marine; it is what's inside that really matters."

To receive a copy of the book, "Roots of Two Black Marine Sergeants Major," send \$10 to SgtMaj Edgar R. Huff, Rt. 1, Box 199, Hubert, NC 28539. It is the story of Huff and SgtMaj Gilbert "Hashmark" Johnson.

