

Breaking Barriers

Interview with a Montford Point Marine

By Kwame Gyamfi

Sgt Primus Kinlaw, USMC (Ret) born on April 25, 1925, is one of the original Montford Point Marines. Sgt Kinlaw and his wife, Kathleen, have been married for more than 68 years and together raised seven children in Jacksonville, N.C., in a small community called Bell Fork Homes. The community was home to a large number of African-American Marines who integrated the Marine Corps in the 1940s. Recently, Sgt Kinlaw sat down with his son Kwame Gyamfi and discussed his experiences as a Marine and family man.

Joining the Marine Corps

Kwame Gyamfi: What inspired you to go into the Marine Corps?

Sgt Kinlaw: My brother Henry was in the Navy and was at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese bombed it. When he finished boot camp, he came home to Brittons Neck, S.C. During those days, we didn't see many people wearing military uniforms. I went down to the local office to sign up and I saw the [Marine Corps] uniforms. I told them, that I wanted to sign up for the service with the poster of the man wearing that green uniform. I was 17 years old.

Kwame Gyamfi: Did you finish high school before you joined the Marine Corps?

Sgt Kinlaw: No, I was 17 years old with one year left but there wasn't anything going on in Brittons Neck, S.C., any way other than farming.

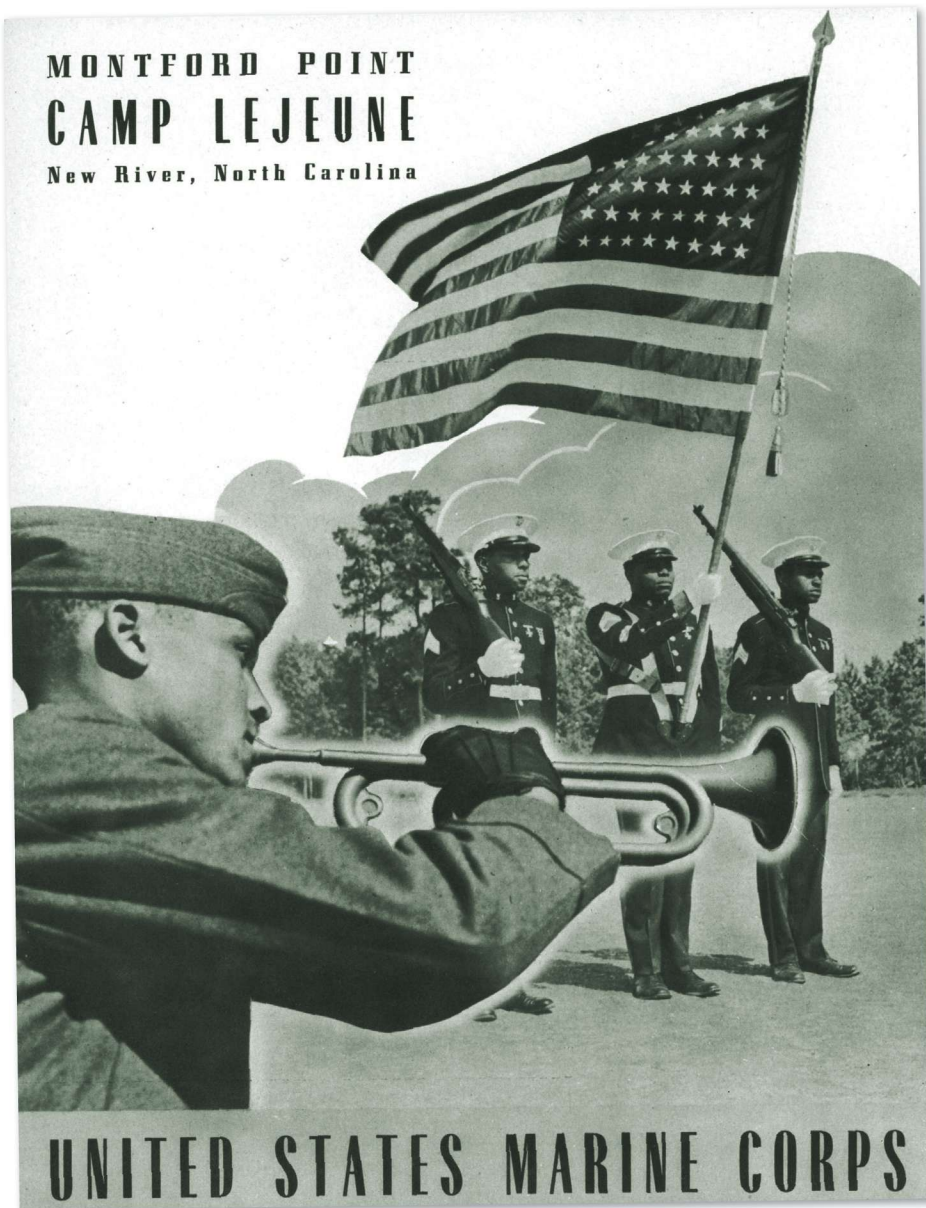
Kwame Gyamfi: Did your parents try to stop you from joining the service?

Sgt Kinlaw: No, I wanted to do it and no one stopped me. But, after I got in, I tried to get my mother to write a letter to get me out.

Kwame Gyamfi: What made you want to get out soon after you got in?

Sgt Kinlaw: When they started "manhandling" me at Montford Point, I wanted my mama to get me out of here [laughter]. I remember the drill sergeant smacking me upside my head as soon as I stepped off the bus.

Kwame Gyamfi: When you retired you were an E-6?



The title page from the 1943 Montford Point Platoon Book shows several of the original Montford Point Marines who helped to integrate the Marine Corps during World War II.

Sgt Kinlaw: Yes, I retired an E-6. No, I didn't aspire to go higher in rank due to the politics of that time. It becomes more political and more about relationships and I wasn't that type of [Marine].

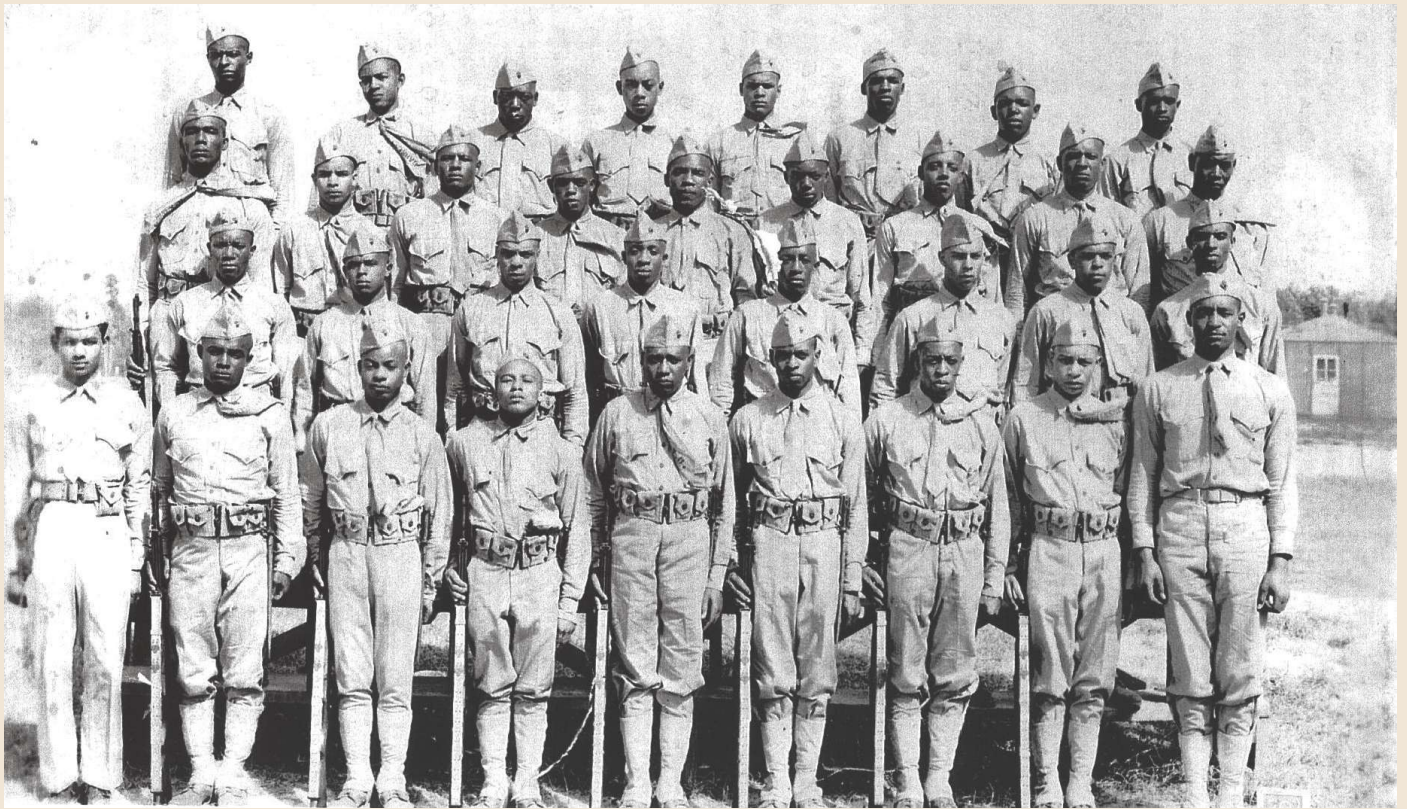
Serving in World War II And the Korean War

Kwame Gyamfi: Did you realize that you were the first African-American men to integrate the Marine Corps?

Sgt Kinlaw: No, they started taking us in 1942 and I came in 1943. It was during the wartime, so we didn't think about it as anything historical or significant. The last group of Montford Point Marines came in 1949.

Kwame Gyamfi: When did you actually see action in WW II?

Sgt Kinlaw: Right after our two-month boot camp training, we were shipped



Platoon 202, Company A at Montford Point in 1943. Today, Montford Point is known as Camp Johnson, a satellite base of Camp Lejeune. Home to Marine Corps Combat Service Support Schools, the base is named after SgtMaj Gilbert H. "Hashmark" Johnson.



Marines made good use of the camp library after routine duty hours in 1945. The Montford Point Marines were restricted from visiting many liberty spots in nearby Jacksonville, N.C., due to segregation laws in place at the time.

overseas. We immediately saw combat because it was wartime. I was in the South Pacific area.

Kwame Gyamfi: Do you remember losing fellow Marines in WW II and the Korean War?

Sgt Kinlaw: Yes, I lost quite a few people.

Kwame Gyamfi: The Korean War is where you were injured?

Sgt Kinlaw: Yes, it was a different war than WW II. The Korean War was like working with the Korean people during the day and later fighting them at night.

Kwame Gyamfi: When did you decide to make the Marine Corps a career?

Sgt Kinlaw: Right after the Korean War ... I made it a career and retired after 22 years, 4 months and 28 days. I'm glad I went in and stayed for 22 years and I'm glad that I survived.

Wife and Kids

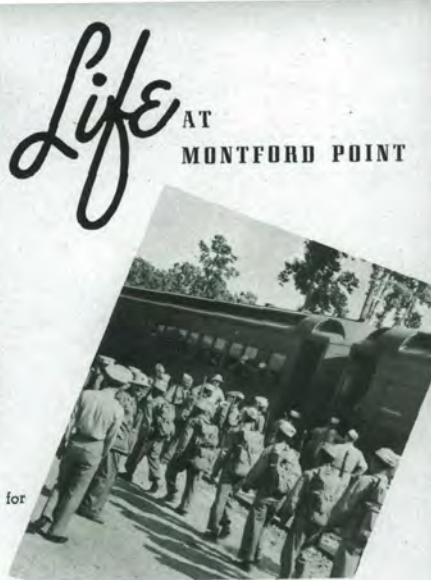
Kwame Gyamfi: How did you meet your wife?

Sgt Kinlaw: That's a long story. She was in high school. I met her through one of her sisters that worked on base. Her [sister's] name was Mammie. I dropped [Mammie] her off at home and met her sister, Kathy, who later became my wife.

Kwame Gyamfi: How long was it before you asked for her hand in marriage?



Partial view of camp.



Troops leaving for ports unknown.

Librarian at work.
Main entrance.

Troops on the march.
Fire-fighting equipment.



These select images from a 1943 platoon book provide a glimpse of life on base for Marines assigned to Montford Point, Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Sgt Kinlaw: It was about a year and half. I did a tour in Korea and came back and married her. We kept in touch by writing letters back and forth. We got married in 1951.

Kwame Gyamfi: When did you start your family?

Sgt Kinlaw: We had our first child in 1952. We stayed at the Opa Locka, Fla., Marine Corps base. We stayed there for about four years and returned ... to Camp Lejeune. Later we were stationed in Hawaii for a few years and then moved back to Jacksonville, N.C., to a community called Bell Fork Homes. Bell Fork Homes was a segregated housing district. We had a total of seven children with three born at the naval hospital in Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Kwame Gyamfi: Do you think that

raising your kids with strict discipline is a good thing?

Sgt Kinlaw: Yes, there were a lot of kids that grew up without parents from the Marine Corps and those kids didn't have any discipline and got into a lot of trouble.

Kwame Gyamfi: So, you have no regrets about how you raised your children?

Sgt Kinlaw: I sure don't.

Civil Rights and Segregation

Kwame Gyamfi: What was your first experience with segregation?

Sgt Kinlaw: There was segregation on base. In the cafeteria, African-Americans weren't allowed to eat in the hall. The cafeteria staff would bring us our food. We thought it was funny, because we were getting personal service.

Kwame Gyamfi: Can you tell me the story about the desegregation of Paradise Point Golf Course?

Sgt Kinlaw: The golf caddy for the base general was an African-American named Mr. Chapman. The general asked him about golfing over the weekend. The caddy reminded the general that African-Americans were not allowed to play golf on base over the weekend. Soon afterwards, the general signed an order to desegregate the golf course so that African-Americans could play golf anytime including the weekends.

Kathleen Kinlaw's Thoughts on Being a Military Wife

Kwame Gyamfi: What was it like in the early days as a military wife?

Kathleen Kinlaw: My husband really took care of me. He was gone a lot and I was home with the children. But, if I needed something or was at the hospital he would be there and I really appreciated that.

Kwame Gyamfi: What were some of the low points of military life?

Kathleen Kinlaw: The times that he was away from the family was tough. The children and I would spend time at the church and we had to figure out how to keep ourselves happy. It was lonely.

Kwame Gyamfi: What was the most fascinating time of your marriage?

Kathleen Kinlaw: It was celebrating our 50th wedding anniversary. Also, having our children. When we had our first child, I didn't know how to change a diaper. So, I prayed to God for guidance, and three military wives helped me to get through it along with Navy Relief.

Final Thoughts

Kwame Gyamfi: What would you do differently about your experience in the Marine Corps?

Sgt Kinlaw: I would have gotten a higher education and would have become a commissioned officer. When I first came into the military, I was just a country boy from a small town and really didn't understand anything about the service.

Kwame Gyamfi: I guess that is the life of an enlisted man?

Sgt Kinlaw: That is right, buddy [laughter].

Editor's note: All photos from the collection of Joseph H. Carpenter, U.S. Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections.