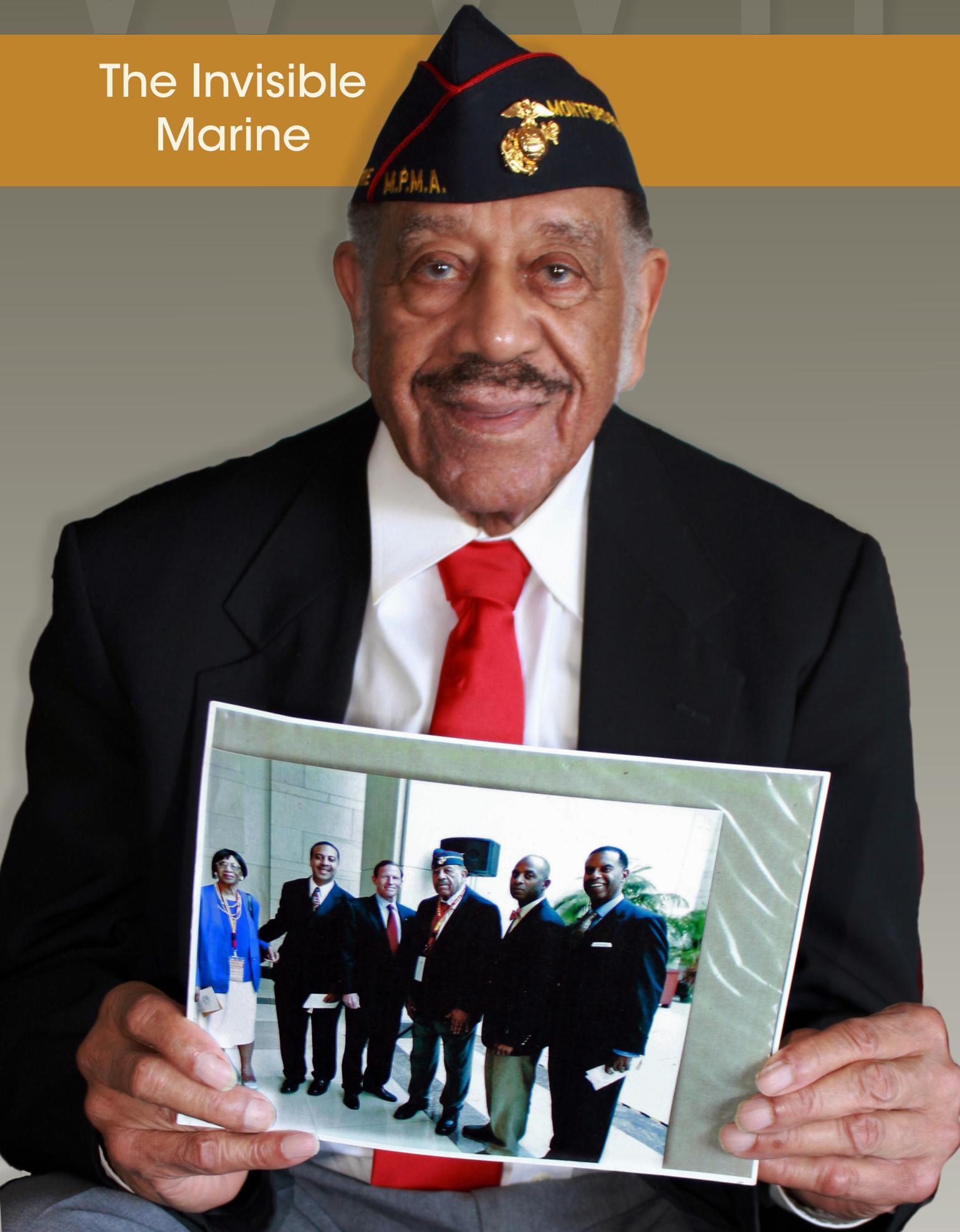


# CLAYTON PITRE

The Invisible  
Marine



*“This is not just black history or Marine Corps history. This is American history. The world needs to understand the history of the Montford Point Marines.”*

—Dr. James T. Averhart Jr., president,  
National Montford Point Marine Association

Clayton Pitre, a Creole person of color from Bayou Country, is hung up on justice, not race. The longtime Seattleite fought two wars in the spring of 1945—prejudice on the home front and tyranny abroad. He acquired the grit of a U.S. Marine in a country that labeled him inferior, and then dodged enemy fire on an island subjected to suicide warfare.

Pitre’s love of country isn’t overshadowed by America’s dark history—even the mind-bending truths that surround his ancestors and his own life. Pitre has long refused to let racism get under his skin, and he’s lived discrimination like any African American from the segregated Deep South. Pitre has been



At 92, Clayton Pitre is among the only surviving World War II Montford Point Marines in the Pacific Northwest. *Lori Larson*

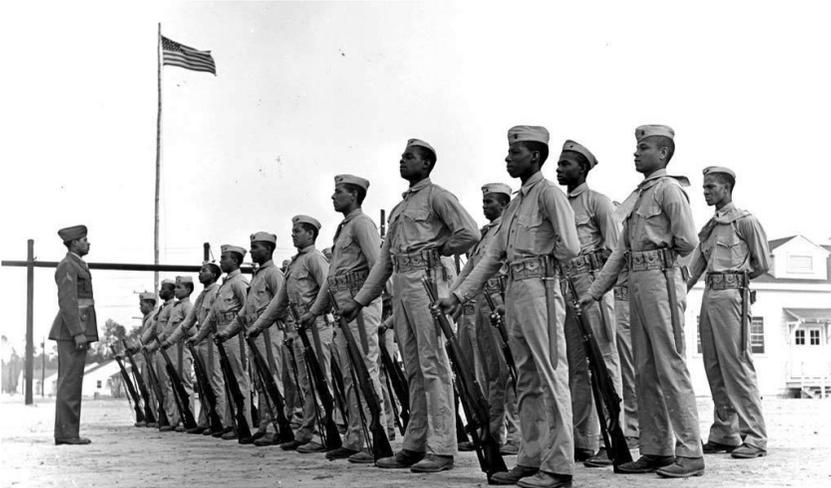
ordered to the back of the bus. He’s been intellectually underestimated. And he’s been called a Negro, a term he abhors. A descendant of enslaved ancestors and slave owners, the wrongs against Pitre’s family run centuries deep. Still, he’s over the mistreatment. It’s the historical record that matters to him now.

Pitre and 20,000 African Americans broke the color barrier in World War II when they trained at a segregated base in Jacksonville, North Carolina, and joined

one of the most elite military organizations in the world. No black man had enlisted in the United States Marines Corps since a known slave from Delaware fought in the Revolutionary War with a handful of other African American Continental Marines. The World War II milestone generated little recognition for decades. In 2012, the Montford Point Marines were finally awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.

Pitre has outlived most of the men now. At 92, he is charming and sharp. Pitre emerges from downstairs in his Seattle home with a book on the men who made history. A picture of them, the Montford Point Marines, appears in a frame on the hearth of his fireplace. Over the years, Pitre has flown off to gatherings of the Montford Point Marines, hoping to connect and do his part to preserve their legacy. The goal is becoming more difficult to achieve. Pitre is among a dwindling number of WWII Montford Point Marines who can tell their story. There are approximately 400 still living in the country. Pitre is believed to be one of the only survivors in the Pacific Northwest.

IT WAS PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT who helped the Montford Point Marines break the color barrier. His Executive Order 8802



Some 20,000 African Americans trained at a segregated base in North Carolina during World War II. "They had to fight for the right to fight. They wanted to serve. They wanted to prove that they were brave," says James Averhart Jr., president of the Montford Point Marine Association. *U.S. Marine Corps*

## EXECUTIVE ORDER

REAFFIRMING POLICY OF FULL PARTICIPATION IN  
THE DEFENSE PROGRAM BY ALL PERSONS, REGARDLESS  
OF RACE, CREED, COLOR, OR NATIONAL ORIGIN, AND  
DIRECTING CERTAIN ACTION IN FURTHERANCE OF  
SAID POLICY.

WHEREAS it is the policy of the United States to encourage full participation in the national defense program by all citizens of the United States, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, in the firm belief that the democratic way of life within the Nation can be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders; and

WHEREAS there is evidence that available and needed workers have been barred from employment in industries engaged in defense production solely because of considerations of race, creed, color, or national origin, to the detriment of workers' morale and of national unity:

NOW, THEREFORE, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the statutes, and as a prerequisite to the successful conduct of our national defense production effort, I do hereby reaffirm the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries <sup>or Government</sup> because of race, creed, color, or national origin, and I do hereby declare that it is the duty of employers and of labor organizations, in furtherance of said policy and of this order, to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed color, or national origin;

Executive Order 8802 is considered one of the 100 "Milestone Documents" by the National Archives. The order banned discrimination in the defense industry. *National Archives*

opened the ranks of the U.S. Marine Corps in the spring of 1941, as Hitler conspired to invade the Soviet Union. Racial tension mounted with the competition for home front war-industry jobs. Construction soon began at Montford Point, a segregated depot known for its infestation of poisonous snakes as much as its rigorous instruction.

Total acceptance of African Americans remained elusive on and off the military base. “There would be a definite loss of efficiency in the Marine Corps if we have to take Negroes,” warned Major General Thomas Holcomb, the Commandant. During a boxing match at the segregated boot camp, a one-star general declared to hundreds of black recruits: “They’ve made many changes since I was stateside. They’ve added the woman ... And when I came into this camp and saw you people wearing our globe and anchor, I knew there was a war on.”



Authorities who’d never seen a black Marine reputedly arrested Montford Pointers on liberty in their distinctive dress blues. One was R.J. Wood in Cleveland. They took him into custody and accused him of impersonating a Marine.

Major General Thomas Holcomb resisted the notion of opening up the U.S. Marine Corps to African Americans. “There would be a definite loss of efficiency,” he said. *U.S. Army*

It took more than 160 years to break the color barrier, but acceptance would require still more time. “They had to fight for the right to fight,” says James Averhart Jr., president of the Montford Point Marine Association. “They wanted to serve. They wanted to prove that they were brave.”

Despite their sacrifices at various battles—they killed the enemy in Guam, risked their lives in the vicious fighting at Iwo Jima and suffered injury at Peleliu—thumb through most World War II chronologies and the Montford Point Ma-



The Montford Point Marines engaged in landings throughout the war in the Pacific. Seventeen of the Marines were wounded in the Battle of Peleliu.

*National Archives*

rines are nowhere to be found. “Your history was not credited to you,” Pitre explains. “Therefore, it was easy to show him [an African American] as lesser than the other because he hadn’t done anything. Some people say, ‘You ain’t got no history.’ ”

“If you bring up the history, you have to bring up the bad part,” suggests Joe Geeter, a past national president of the Montford Point Marine Association. “People don’t want to hear it. But African Americans today need to understand where their legacy started.”

THE DEEP ROOTS OF CLAYTON PITRE unfold against a backdrop of lush green pastures and low-lying swamps. His hometown of Opelousas, Louisiana—the state’s third oldest city—became the temporary Confederate capital during the Civil War and the scene of a deadly race riot in the Reconstruction Era that followed. Pitre’s ancestors—black, white, mulatto, slaves and slave owners—began a legacy in farming that afforded them more dignity than enslaved blacks of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Nearly 100 years before America abolished slavery, his white ancestor, Francois Lemelle, professed the value of justice and equality.

Pitre's great-great-great maternal grandmother, Marie-Jeanne Davion, was an African American slave who bore the children of Francois Lemelle, a prominent grower in Southwest Louisiana. Marie won her freedom on December 5, 1772, nearly a century before the country abolished slavery with the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Marie eventually took Francois' last name.

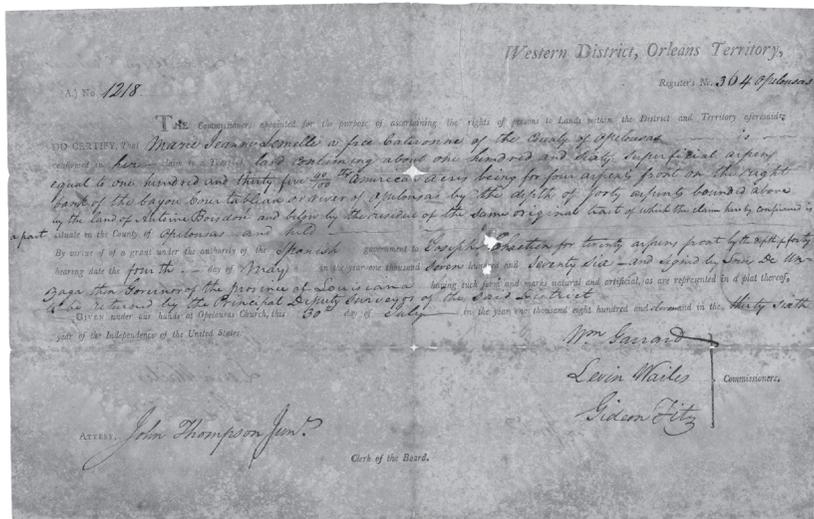
Francois Lemelle died in 1789. In his will, he recognized his relationship with his onetime black slave and the children they shared. Lemelle left part of his estate to Marie and his household goods—beds, mattresses, pillows and blankets—because “of the care and pain which the said Marie-Jeanne took of him for many years and for which he had not given her any salary.” Francois' children and his Caucasian wife, Charlotte Labbe, agreed with his wishes.

“They renounce all claims to her servitude, even if the law would have been in their favor. They do so because of the intentions of their deceased mother, Dame Lemelle, whom they remember stating many times that she desired that Marie-Jeanne enjoy freedom. They also do so because of the act of freedom passed by the said Francois Lemelle stating that he wanted and intended that Marie-Jeanne and all her children, without distinction, enjoy the rights, privileges and prerogatives held by free people.”

Marie Lemelle settled near Opelousas in St. Landry Parish after Francois' death. There she acquired more than 800 acres along the Bayou Courtableau, in South Central Louisiana. Marie, her sons and 15 slaves made something of the land, and so be-



Opelousas is one of Louisiana's oldest cities and Pitre's hometown. During the Civil War, it was temporarily named the Confederate capital. *Library of Congress*



A certificate of land ownership for Marie Lemelle, Clayton's great-great-great grandmother who bore children with a prominent Caucasian grower. *The Historic New Orleans Collection—Williams Research Center*

gan the family's long history in farming. The land and home gave the family a sense of pride and respect. "In southwest Louisiana, there were all of these small farms—60 acres, 40 acres, 20 acres, 80 acres," Pitre says. "There is a difference of that ownership of a small section of land and the type of citizen you have who can profess ownership of something. He has a certain kind of dignity for himself. In the south, a man's home is his castle."

Clayton's paternal ancestors, Acadians, were banished from Nova Scotia for refusing loyalty to the Protestant King of England. Many of the French Catholics made their way to the bayous of Louisiana.

Pitre came along on June 30, 1924—the fourth child of seven and a Creole of color in Jim Crow America. Slavery had long been abolished, but discrimination became the life he knew. "You go downtown to the courthouse to pay the taxes. There are two water fountains—one is white and one way down the way is black. There is one restroom for white and one for colored. When you go in there most of the time it hadn't been cleaned, you know? As a child you grow up with that. Sometimes you ask your folks, 'Why?' And they say, 'Shut up.'



Pitre's parents, Eugenie and Gilbert. Clayton's father taught him the psychology behind a strong work ethic. He considers the long hours out on the farm among the greatest lessons of his childhood *Clayton Pitre collection*

“We always got the short end of the stick. Our parents had used logic with us knowing that you weren't going to win. If you're not going to win, why would you alone take up that battle?” Clayton never let it get to him.

Pitre has fond memories of a childhood filled with influential role models. His maternal grandmother Victoria, who was slow afoot and knew little English, taught him French. His father Gilbert, a stern taskmaster, taught him how to work—the great lesson of his earliest years. “He just insisted. You have to do it. And it came from the survival of the family first. That's what it was. You work as a unit in your home. You had to do your task. If you didn't, something went wrong.” His mother Eugenie, wise and educated by a Belgian tutor, demonstrated the power of prayer—a ritual he carried with him to the Pacific. “I did come from a Roman Catholic family and my mom was a praying woman. She said her Rosary in French in the morning and at night.” The Pitres had seven children—Gilda, Emmett, John, Willie, Clayton, Wilfred and Edgar. Their sons served their country. Their daughter became a nun.

Clayton was the son of a yam and cotton farmer, and he worked long, hard days in the country. At first light, he'd quiet the animals—chickens, cows, hogs and horses. He remembers his father ginning the cotton. “And they would factor it, and

grade it and things like that. And he would go from one person to another and whoever would give him a better deal, that's where he sold it. Oh, they had a marketing strategy." When the droughts came, Pitre watched the corn dry up like sunbaked cigars on a stalk.

Even in tough times, the Pitres proudly never depended on welfare. They learned to reap the most of the farming life. "You put some tomato plants in, some cucumbers, string beans, okra and you're on your way. My mom always knew how to can. Rather than having all this dry stuff, you can open up a jar and have almost fresh tomatoes."

Pitre was a self-described odd-ball kid who read voraciously to escape to places he could only imagine. "Reading did make a difference for me—like if I got something on New York and they would talk about the subway. Opelousas still doesn't have a public transportation system, mind you, but here I was reading about people using a subway or train, or an elevated train in Chicago. So, it was telling me about a world that existed in my time, but I'm nowhere around to use it."

He was around Opelousas when the Depression hit and still remembers the looting and empty wallets. But World War



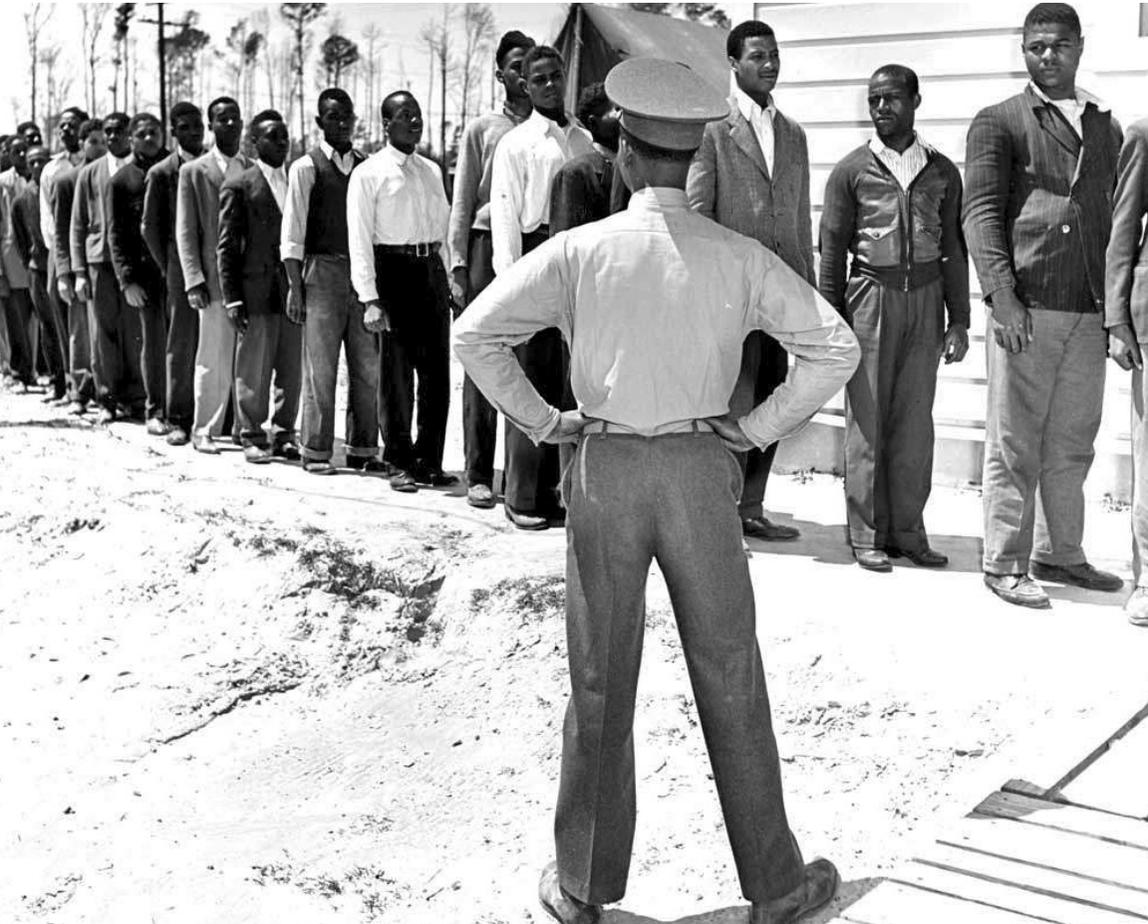
Gilbert and Eugenie Pitre raised six boys and one daughter. All six young men served their country, but only Clayton trained as a Montford Point Marine. Clayton appears in the background, holding a child. *Clayton Pitre collection*

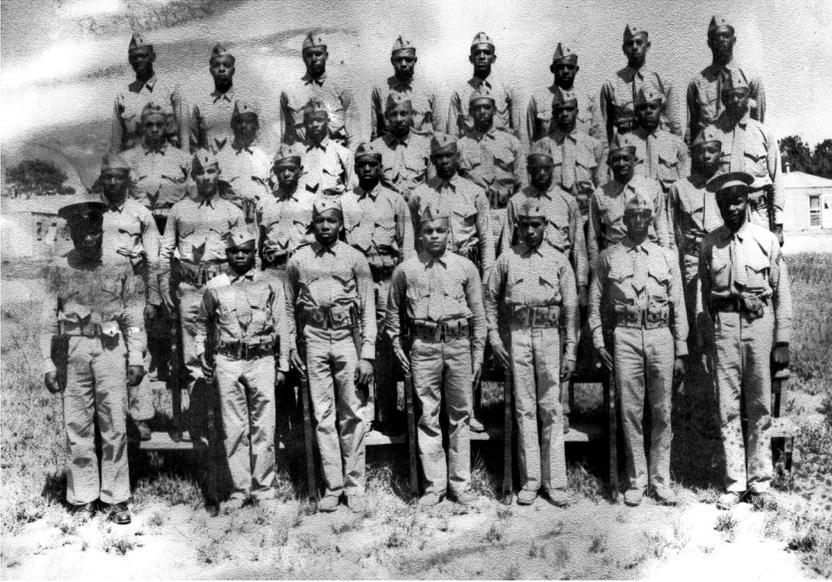
It spurred a recovery: “They started building at Camp Polk, Louisiana, and in Alexandria, Camp Beauregard. They began to build those places up. And they started an airfield down in Lake Charles, Louisiana. In Texas, they started running a pipeline across the country to the east coast.”

Pitre was 17 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and 19 when he was drafted into the U.S. Navy. He chose to enlist in the U.S. Marines instead. His papers were stamped “Colored.” Then he boarded a bus bearing a sign that ordered him to the back row. He was bound for a segregated base in North Carolina. Like his five brothers and his father, who escorted POWs during World War I, he would serve his country.

CLAYTON PITRE ARRIVED at Jacksonville in August 1943, amid stifling humidity, swarms of mosquitoes and terrain crawling

New recruits prepare for rigorous training at Montford Point, a segregated military base in Jacksonville, North Carolina. *U.S. Marine Corps*





Pitre arrived in North Carolina in August 1943, after Montford Point had been operating about a year. He was assigned to Platoon 126. *Clayton Pitre collection*

with poisonous snakes. Like the other African American Marines, he slept in a pre-fabricated hut made of pressed cardboard, not the barracks the white recruits lived in at nearby Camp Lejeune. He was banned from crossing the railroad tracks or from entering Camp Lejeune without a white escort. He could wear the globe and anchor, but he couldn't advance up the ranks like his white counterparts and wear the gold bars of a second lieutenant. "What happened in the Marine Corps that was strange for a whole period of time was they limited the black servicemen to not becoming officers. They could become master sergeants, any kind of non-commissioned rank you could get it, but when it comes to wearing a gold bar, no. You find that person with the same education— he's the officer. We protested in various ways and let them know we didn't like it."

Pitre was assigned to Platoon 126 and he began proving himself on day one. "When I was drafted into the Marine Corps, those guys from Chicago and New York, they expected me to be a dummy. They really did. But it wasn't so," Pitre says.

The attitudes were familiar to Clayton, who'd grown up in the segregated Deep South. "As far as I was concerned, it was old hat for me. I came from Louisiana—out there in the

tulies you might say—and this was a way of life, you know?”

Black Marines who'd grown up north of the Mason-Dixon Line found themselves in another world. According to the Montford Point Marine Association, the men were treated as an experiment initially, doubted for their intellect and performance. Many Montford Pointers reported weeks of discrimination—name-calling and other verbal abuse, extra physical activity and physical abuse. Says Joe Geeter, a past president of the Montford Point Marine Association, “What they did was make them better Marines.”

Soon, Montford Point Marines broke gunnery and anti-artillery records and prepared for some of the bloodiest battles of the Pacific Theater.

PITRE'S UNCOMPROMISING TRAINING began as early as 5:00 a.m. “You couldn't hardly see the guy and he's calling off—telling you what's going to happen that day. And then you would march back to your tent and you would fix your bunk and you would clean the floor and everything else.” His schedule matched the whites': weapons and field training, physical conditioning, marksmanship training and a week of live firing at a rifle range. To this day, Pitre holds the utmost respect for the U.S. Marine Corps for the discipline he learned at Montford Point. All things considered, Pitre believes he was treated fairly.

The Montford Point Marine was assigned to the First Marine Ammunition



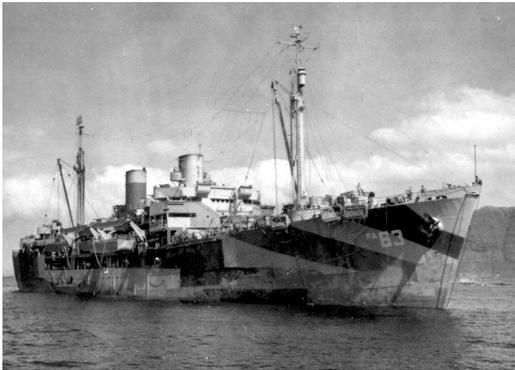
African American drill instructors were tough on their recruits. “What they did was make them better Marines,” says Joseph Geeter, past president, Montford Point Marine Association. *National Archives*

Company with eight officers, 251 enlisted men and a fleet of trucks, jeeps and trailers for carting ammunition. There were 12 ammunition companies established in the war in total, and they were crucial in accommodating hundreds of thousands of fighting Marines in the Pacific. The Corps depended on a better system to load and offload ships and trucks, and to haul supplies to men on the frontlines. The laborers who would support those in hand-to-hand combat would learn all there is to know about handling ammunition, fuses and detonators. Then they'd haul the explosives to the heart of battle.

Like 13,000 Montford Pointers, Pitre was assigned to the Pacific Theater. After 21 days zigzagging through the Panama Canal, he arrived at the ruins of Pearl Harbor on New Year's Day 1944. "When we pulled in and I saw those ships on that side in the harbor—they hadn't cleared them out—then I really knew what the Japanese had done to us. There was no question about the fact that we were into something."

Pitre left Hawaii. He was sent to Kwajalein, Saipan and back to Hawaii before making his way toward Okinawa.

KAMIKAZE SUICIDE BOMBERS swarmed like bees over the Ryukyu Islands. It was Easter Sunday, 1945. Clayton Pitre watched from aboard the *USS Bladen* as his ship neared the rugged mountains and deep ravines of Okinawa—the chain's largest island. This was the scene of the last major battle of the Pacific War. The massive amphibious assault demanded control of



Launched in May 1944, the *USS Bladen* carried Pitre to Okinawa. The ship received two battle stars for her service in World War II.

Okinawan air bases that would allow the Allies to launch pivotal bombing raids against Japan, more than 300 miles away. The Allies were dominating Imperial Japan, but the savage fighting on Okinawa would make history as the bloodiest battle of the Pacific.

Pitre prepared for his role as a decoy. “Oh my God. We went into the bay on the north part of the island, in Nago. There were these kamikazes that wanted to dive into those ships and the sky was just messed up with anti-aircraft.”

He climbed down the nets and into landing craft in a feint attack at the northern part of the island. “We got into those barges and we went within so many yards of the island and then turned around. A whole fleet of us went back to the ship to pull the Japanese north. Meanwhile, our Spitfires were just shelling the beach. They were just firing along the beach. They landed in the south end of the island, a whole bunch of fighters.”

Pitre, one of 2,000 black Marines who fought on Okinawa, lived the working conditions of the Pacific War for nearly three months. He slept in a pup tent, dodged enemy fire and shook off the constant hum of Japanese warplanes flying overhead.

Pitre and the men in his company carried heavy explosives in driving rains and through deep mud. There was no cover. “You think that you may lose it but you’ve gone this far. You just hope that it won’t happen. I can’t describe it. What happens with people is there is something in you. I prayed. I prayed to myself. I prayed that I’d make it. But I saw others



U.S. Marines land in Okinawa. Their 82-day campaign in 1945 would prove to be the bloodiest battle of the Pacific War. *National Archives*

who broke. I saw others who broke and they just had to send them back.”

Some of the Montford Point Marines carried the wounded on stretchers. Others found themselves in hand-to-hand combat. “Okinawa was a long, hard run, really. And it was the last one because President Truman—after he found out we had the atomic bomb— he wasn’t for landing on Japan. We had radios by then on Okinawa, and if you heard what those Japanese were saying. They told us, ‘You don’t know us! We will fight you to the last man!’ And they didn’t stop after one bomb was dropped. So that tells you the effort we were up against.”

The Japanese, ferocious defenders of the island, used the setting to their advantage—surfacing from tombs, caves and



*National Archives*

tunnels to lob explosives at the enemy. Suicide warriors plunged from the skies and targeted warships. Psychological warfare occurred day in and day out. The constant threat of a Japanese pilot became unbearable. “He would come by just about the time you were trying to get yourself together, about 6:00 in the morning. He would fly over you and the guys would be shooting at him. But they wouldn’t get him. You would

have to take cover while he’s flying all over your head. And then come 12 o’clock, by the time you’re getting ready to eat, he’d come back. The psychological thing—it broke some people.”

Pitre witnessed the breakdown of Floyd Hayes, a fellow Marine, en route to San Diego after the war. “Floyd started walking through the chow hall and he started preaching—something about being saved. He was not coherent to me. Someone came and got him and gave him a shot. I didn’t see him anymore. They kept him sedated.

“Well, I was down at Third and Union in Seattle to take

a bus one day and here's Floyd. And he said, 'Man, they've got some good doctors in San Diego.' He said what happened to him. After a while he got a vision that his father had died while he was on the ship. But he said really, he couldn't sleep. His insomnia kicked in until finally he broke."

Beyond the psychological warfare and arduous labor, monsoons swept across the island. "One of them came through and we were in this tent," Pitre remembers. "We were in each corner holding down this pole. I'd never seen anything like it. I didn't know what they meant when they said monsoon season. That wind is something else! And it comes from the southwest. I said to someone, 'Why do you always have hedges on the southwest part of your yard?' They said, 'When the evil spirit comes, he comes straight. He does not know how to come around.' "

Pitre avoided disaster another day, when he climbed into a foxhole in the middle of a vegetable farm during heavy rains. He dug trenches to drain the water away from the fox-



The Battle of Okinawa produced a sea of mud and debris, leveled the island and resulted in a staggering death toll. *National Archives*

hole where he'd take cover from the kamikazes. He found two old doors and rested them on top of gallon cans nearby. Then he spread his canvas out. He'd sleep there on his dry makeshift bed.

"Why don't you come on?" a buddy asked. "We're going to stay in that old building tonight."

"I'm not going over there." Pitre could make out the old farmhouse with the coral tile roof—beaten and battered by monsoon winds and a mortar shell. The men were huddled south of Yontan Airfield on the Okinawan coast.

Pitre's fears were realized when the building collapsed overnight, breaking one man's hips. "If we had gone in there, that would have been a bad deal," Pitre says.

All told, the very worst of the Pacific War was not the fierce winds or backbreaking labor, but the loss of life everywhere. It's the image he's never forgotten. "I saw men stacked up like cordwood—dead, moving bodies like five high. That was about the saddest thing I saw. That makes you cognizant of what you're into when you see a



Montford Point Marines rest during the Japanese retreat on Okinawa. *National Archives*

lot of dead bodies that way. That's the price of war.

"It appears to me we've still got people who don't really realize what the heck war is all about. As a president tries to bring these guys back home and somebody gets mad. There's a limit to how many lives you're going to sacrifice over there."

In the throes of battle, a non-commissioned black officer once openly challenged the positioning of black Marines

during Pitre's service on Okinawa. "We were in a lower part of a valley," Pitre remembers. "If you interfere with coral, when the water comes that coral is going to shift. One time something like that happened. Water that had been draining lost its course. It just came down upon us in the valley. I grabbed my shoes, both of them, and it just washed stuff away. Then, we're all out in the water. We blacks are down here and the whites were in high ground. Not that they intended that, but this guy protested."

The 82-day campaign to seize Okinawa ended in favor of the Allies, but the price was steep all around. Across the landscape, you could see bombed-out buildings, bloodstained caves and farm fields in ruins. The death toll was staggering—14,000 Allies, 77,000 Japanese soldiers and 100,000 civilians or more. Japanese commanders and soldiers killed themselves rather than surrender. Civilians jumped from rocky cliffs to take their own lives. "It was a scene straight out of hell," remembers Higa Tomiko, then 7. "There is no other way to describe it."

The gruesome battle for Okinawa set the stage for the atomic bombs dropped in August on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that ushered in the end of World War II.

PITRE'S FIRST MARINE AMMUNITION COMPANY was soon assigned to North China. The men would repatriate the Japanese and stand guard on trains vulnerable to attack. Black Marines who traveled there remembered the Chinese touching their faces as if to determine "if the color would run off on the fingers." But eventually the reception was warm.

Pitre has never forgotten standing guard himself on a freight train bound for Tientsin: "We were going to deliver to some Marines there who would see that it would get to where it should be. But until I delivered it to them, I had to stay with it. So the train would stop different places. Attendants to the train—they could talk the language of the people around. And people would come toward this train. The trainman had no business to get into a fight with another civilian there. But anyway, it happened. This man from the community—he picked up an instrument and hit the trainman on the side of the head.

And it was a bad, bad hit. So here I have this guy come crying to me and bleeding. And I just looked all around to see where I was. And then I saw a building with the American flag on it. It looked like it could be military. I scribbled in longhand that this man was traveling with us as we were moving this food. *Please give him some medical aid.* And I wrote my name and rank and serial number. And he went over to that building and we moved. The CIA got involved.”

It remains Pitre’s fondest memory of World War II.

EXCEPT TO VISIT, Clayton never returned to Bayou Country after the war. He considered the family farm there a dead-end and followed his brother to Washington instead, chasing a possible job with the U.S. Navy. Pitre started working for Todd Shipyard when he overheard recent high school graduates talking about their prom. The conversation led to his enrollment at Broadway-Edison Tech, a school for GIs, which awarded Pitre his high school diploma. A college degree at Seattle University



Clayton and Gloria, flanked by family in Washington D.C. in 2012. Pitre and 400 Montford Point Marines finally received the Congressional Gold Medal.  
*Clayton Pitre collection*

followed. He met his wife Gloria. They married and had three sons. Pitre eventually became Chief Housing Developer for the Central Area Motivation Program, a group that provides housing to families earning low or moderate incomes.

Looking back, Pitre is grateful for the GI bill that afforded him his education and the clear objective of his service in World War II. “We had a true mission. You knew what Hitler was doing and what he had done. You knew what the Japanese were doing and what they had done. But we find ourselves sometimes getting into skirmishes. This mission is not as clear for these youngsters today.”

He’s proud to be called an African American and considers America “halfway there” on its long road to equality. “The fact is that when all is equal you have gained. The military no longer has to worry about that problem. They have fine people from all races who’ve done well for their country.”

Over the last dozen years or so, Pitre has belonged to a Northwest support group for U.S. Marines. Every year around November 10<sup>th</sup>, the birthday of the United States Marine Corps, members get together. The first slice of cake is presented to the oldest veteran who, in turn, passes the slice on to the youngest. Clayton Pitre, at 92, is always the oldest Marine in the



Clayton Pitre stands topside on the *USNS Montford Point* in Everett. The ship is a tribute to African American Marine Corps recruits. *Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jeffrey Willadsen/U.S. Navy*

room. Sizing up the new generation in an integrated Corps, Pitre smiles. “I know we’ll be in good shape. We’ve got what we need.”

**Trova Heffernan**

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