

Frederick Branch - First Black Marine Corps Officer

BLUF: Frederick Clinton Branch was the first Black officer of the United States Marine Corps. He trained at Montford Point in 1943, serving in the Pacific during World War II. After World War II, Branch was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps. He reached the rank of captain during the Korean War. Branch left the Marine Corps in 1955, dying in 2005. He is buried at the Quantico National Cemetery in Quantico, Virginia.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS DISPLAYED: Justice, Judgment, Dependability, Initiative, Decisiveness, Integrity, Bearing, Courage, Knowledge, Loyalty, and Enthusiasm.

SETTING THE STAGE: Frederick Branch was born in Hamlet, North Carolina, in 1922. He was the fourth son of James and Lola Branch, who called him "Fred." His father was the African Methodist Church's assistant pastor in Richmond County, NC, moving the family to Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1925. James Branch became the African Methodist Episcopal Church pastor in Poughkeepsie and Fred attended partially segregated public schools in the Mamaroneck Union Free School District. He graduated from high school in 1940, where Branch was an excellent student with a great interest in science. In 1940 he enrolled at Johnson C. Smith University, a Black college, in Charlotte, NC. Branch transferred to Temple University in Philadelphia in 1942.

In May 1943, while attending the university, Branch received his draft notice from the Army. His basic training was at Ft. Bragg, NC, with other Black soldiers. Because the Marine Corps was not meeting its recruitment quota of men of color, the Army occasionally transferred Black recruits to the Marine Corps. The records are unclear as to whether Branch volunteered or was assigned to the Marine Corps.

THE STORY: Frederick Branch arrived at Montford Point Camp, Camp Lejeune, NC, in July 1943 as a member of one of the first Montford Point companies. Like all of the 1943 Montford Point Marines, Branch was trained by White NCOs. Two weeks into his training, he requested an assignment to the Marine Corps Officers Candidate School. According to Branch in 1995, *"They told me to shut that blankety-blank stuff up about being an officer. You ain't going to be no officer."* He finished his training at Montford Point with a private's rank and was assigned to H&S Battery, 51st Defense Battalion at Camp Elliott, CA. Branch served as a supply Marine on Guam and was cited for his "outstanding leadership" abilities. His leadership skills earned him a promotion to corporal in April 1944. When Branch returned to the U.S. at the end of 1944, he was recommended for transfer to OCS training. In July 1945, Frederick Branch became the first man of color assigned to Marine Corps OCS.

In late January 1945, Branch reported to Marine Detachment, Navy V-12 Unit Purdue University, Lafayette, Indiana, to begin academic preparation training for OCS. In July, Branch was sent to OCS training at Quantico. He was the only Black in the 250-member class, graduating in the top half of his class. On 10 November 1945, Branch became the first Black Marine officer. Since the war had ended, however, Branch was placed in the Marine Corps Reserves. The first Black Marine officer in the regular Marine Corps will not be until 1948. John E. Rudder holds that distinction. Despite his accomplishments and rank, Branch experienced discrimination as a Black Marine Corps reservist. Returning to civilian life, Branch married Camilla Robinson on 9 September 1945. He also re-enrolled at Temple University under the G.I. Bill, receiving his bachelor's degree in physics in 1947.

When the Korean War broke out, Frederick Branch was called up to active duty. He reported to The Basic School at Quantico for additional training on 5 April 1951. With the completion of training at TBS, Branch was promoted to the rank of first lieutenant. The promotion brought an assignment to D Battery 1st Mobile AA Battalion at Camp Pendleton in CA. Branch never saw action in Korea during the war. When the Korean War concluded in 1952, 1stLt. Branch was

discharged from the regular Marine Corps and returned to the reserves. Frederick Branch remained in the Marine Corps Reserves until 1955, retiring with the rank of captain. Branch always expressed pride in his Marine Corps career, though he admitted his frustration with the “*lack of speed*” in which the Marine Corps ended racial discrimination in its ranks.

AFTERMATH: The duty the Capt. Branch enjoyed most in the Marine Corps was his attachment to training battalions. “*Working with young Marines and helping them fulfill their potential*” brought him the greatest satisfaction. This love of teaching led Branch to accept a full-time teaching job in 1955 at Murrell H. Dobbins High School in Philadelphia. He was the only science teacher in the school, though he eventually established a fully staffed science department. Branch remained at the school until 1988, when he retired from the School District of Philadelphia.

Fred and Camilla Branch remained in the Philadelphia area for the remainder of their lives. They never had children of their own, yet Branch stated that he “*had the privilege of raising hundreds of children in his classroom.*” One of the most significant sources of family pride was that six of his seven siblings joined the military, and six graduated from college.

In 1995, the Senate passed a resolution honoring Mr. Branch on the 50th anniversary of his officer's commission. Two years later, the main OCS building at Quantico was named in his honor. Branch passed away on 10 April 2005 in Philadelphia. In 2006, the Marine Corps Recruiting Command created the Frederick C. Branch Leadership Scholarship. It is a Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps (NROTC) scholarship for students who are currently attending or have received letters of acceptance to one of 17 historically black colleges and universities that have NROTC programs on campus.

QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do the words “resilience” and “perseverance” best describe Frederick Branch?
2. What jobs did the Montford Point Marines perform during the war?
3. At what point did Montford Point Marines see combat duty? Why?
4. Was life in America better for the Montford Point Marines once they were discharged? Why or why not?

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