

National Montford Point Marine Association, Inc.



Est: 1942 - 1949

Vol. No.1

HOME OF THE ORIGINAL MONTFORD POINT MARINES

www.montfordpointmarines.org

Please, take your knee off our necks so we can breathe

June 8, 2020 at 2:05 PM

LtGen Vincent R. Stewart,
USMC (Ret.)

I do not believe I can make you understand how the slow motion, horrifying, nonchalant murder of a black man has impacted me personally and saddened me for our country. The images invade my every thought and action and has convinced me that I can no longer be silent.

I am by all accounts a successful American who has truly lived the American dream. I am a first generation American who rose to the top of my profession. Some will look at my situation and say it is easy to achieve the American dream if you just work hard enough. Hard work is certainly a key ingredient to success, but sometimes there are simply too many barriers that hard work simply won't overcome. For many people of color these barriers are reflected in emotions of fear, anger, isolation, contempt, resentment, despair and even hatred. What I often hear is that things are better than they were. But I also often hear that I just don't understand the anger, frustration and despair from the black community. So, let me try to explain from the perspective of a successful American.

I am going to present some of my experiences over the last 50 years for those who make up the privileged class, and I ask the reader to close their eyes and try to capture the emotion they would feel if this had been their own experience. I use the word "privilege" advisably because most won't think that they are a part of that class.

It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain of coming to America from Jamaica and becoming a minority at that moment, separate and unequal and having that feeling on the first day of elementary school.

I didn't feel that even if constitutionally able, I could aspire to be the leader of my country or lead a major cooperation, or own my own business . . . No role models, no opportunity, no real future beyond manual low skill labor.

It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain of a high school student being stopped and searched nearly every time I left my apartment—and for a simple reason—the color of my skin. I was never accused of anything; it was a simple stop and search of a young man just like so many others.



It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain from the first time I was called a nigger in anger and later playing on the same football team with the individual who called me a nigger. I knew what was in his heart but we were teammates and we never spoke of the incident.

It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain I experienced working as a door to door encyclopedia salesman (yes—this was a thing before google) when I was greeted by a man on his porch and informed he would have shot me had I walked on his porch a month or so earlier, but he didn't because he was now a Christian.

I offered a hearty praise God and departed as quickly as my legs could move without running.

It wasn't long before the local Sherriff picked me up, for my safety and took me to his "office." Later that evening the Sheriff who had been hosting me until my manager would pick me up, offered to show me the house that a black family had planned on moving in, which somehow burned to the ground the night before their planned move in. Needless to say, I declined the invitation.

It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain of having a college roommate who was hostile and outwardly racist—we ended that relationship with blows being struck.

It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain of being described as the best black officer in a unit, never able to be described as the best officer in the unit; never the first choice for visible prominent assignments in spite of a record of performance that was superior to my colleagues.

It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain of looking around an executive level board room and realizing that you are the only person of color in the room; block checked, we have one and that's all we need to have achieved diversity. Shame we couldn't get a black female, we could have checked two blocks.

It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain when your child begins to inquire about the requirements for joining a local swim club and is told there are no black people on the swim team and black people can't swim. The person who told her this laughed hysterically while telling this to a child.



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Continued:

It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain when your son is stopped in a car with three white friends. They had all been drinking to include the driver, who was white. The officers stated they had something special for my son. They took the three white friends from the car and released them. The three white friends were released and my son got to spend the night in jail.

It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain when your child's friend tells your son that they were not allowed to play with niggers.

It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain of trying to convince a member of Congress that I had earned my position as the director of an agency; that it wasn't a gratuitous appointment because "you must be close to the President" (President Obama at the time).

It's hard for me to explain and help you understand the pain of instant surveillance when you enter a store because you are obviously a shoplifter or being stopped for driving while black or being ignored in a store because obviously you can't afford the merchandise. And I could go on. Just imagine, these are the experiences of someone who volunteered to defend the nation for over three decades and rose to become a Lieutenant General. Now imagine the experiences of those who are unable escape generational poverty, their pain, and their anguish.

Few people of privilege have experienced what I've outlined above but every person of color can recognize almost every example I've described and have survived under these conditions every day, every month, every year of their lives. Surely there must be a long term psychological impact of this sort of systemic experience.

The emotions, the obstacles, the many challenges to overcome in our society did not stop me from being successful but, I didn't do it alone. I stood on the shoulders of the pioneers who broke through barriers at great sacrifice. Men like the Montford Point Marines who fought for the right to fight for liberty, freedom, and democracy paving the way for folks like me.

I was mentored and inspired by men like Generals Colin Power Cliff Stanley and Walt Gaskin. These men broke barriers that facilitated my success. I can't begin to imagine their stories and what they endured to reach the pinnacle of their profession.

But the men who had the greatest impact on my career were three white men of privilege LtGen (ret) Bob "Rusty" Blackman, GENs (Ret) Jim Amos and Joe Dunford. These men saw something in me and did more than mentor me; they sponsored me, advocated for me, and spoke up on my behalf. They did more than extend a hand to pull me up. They lifted and carried me to the top of my profession. These men were in positions that allowed them to carry me; they were able to use their levers of power and influence to elevate me to the top of my profession.

Where would I have landed without the effort of these men?

This begs the question: Who are you lifting up and helping to get across the finish line? Platitudes are nice. But this country needs action. If you are in a position of power and privilege, I challenge you to mentor and advocate for people that don't look like you.

I can't stop believing in the promise of America, because if the dream is not possible here, it's not possible anywhere.

In his book "Democracy in America", Alexis de Tocqueville wrote "I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers – and it was not there . . . in her fertile fields and boundless forests and it was not there . . . in her rich mines and her vast world commerce – and it was not there . . . in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution – and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."

We must prove to a large part of our own population that we are good. As a person who has had incredible success in this country, I am directly appealing to those in positions of power and privilege to recognize the experiences of your fellow Americans who do not look like you, and to take real, specific actions to uplift others.