PLYMOUTH – An administrative oversight initially prevented Jesse James Jackson from receiving trailblazing national recognition as one of the first African-American Marines.

But correcting the mistake only added to the glory and allowed the longtime White Cliffs resident to celebrate what he called “the best day in my whole life” at a spry 92, when he was honored with a Congressional Gold Medal as a Montford Point Marine.

A Georgia native who would have turned 100 next June, Jackson cut as fine a figure in the business world as he did in uniform. From his origins as a young entrepreneur selling firewood to a prosperous career running restaurants and businesses in Boston, Jackson led the life of a jetsetter with his own plane, yacht and limo.

Troubled by declining health in just the last two years, Jackson maintained a sharp mind and spirit, recently telling one longtime friend he was “still the boss.” A White Cliffs resident of more than three decades, he died peacefully at home Sunday morning. He was 99.

Close friend Stan Dabrowski learned of Jackson’s passing the hard way – after finding flashing lights outside his home while making a weekend visit. Dabrowski said he knew immediately that his friend was gone. He clutched the steering wheel and wailed.

“He was a really happy man. There wasn’t anybody who didn’t meet him and walk away with a smile,” Dabrowski, a fellow Marine from a different generation of service, said.

A relative once joked that, in his prime, Jackson had the number of every politician, captain of industry and entertainer of note on speed dial.

He retired to White Cliffs in the early 1990s and was living the good life a decade later when he read about how the hundreds of surviving Marines who trained at Montford Point were given the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award that Congress can bestow, for their service.

Somehow they missed Jackson, but U.S. Rep William Keating made it right two years later in special ceremonies at White Cliffs. Wearing his dress blues and surrounded by friends and fellow Marines, Jackson received his own Congressional Gold Medal and the thanks of his nation.

“You will always be known as a true trailblazer who removed the segregated doors from our beloved Corps, so that future Marines, regardless of their ethnicity or gender, would have an opportunity to serve this grateful nation,” Maj. Stanley Calixte said in helping present the Congressional Gold Medal.

Dabrowski did not meet Jackson until a year or two after the Gold Medal ceremony, but he became fast friends. Dabrowski said he grew to know Jackson like a brother and enjoyed watching how his friend would attract and entertain complete strangers from all walks of life.

“Jesse was such a genius at working people. And you’d be happy and relish the time you spent with him,” Dabrowski said, reminiscing about how strangers would ask to dine with them on the road. More than once, new friends would spring for the tab after hearing Jackson’s story.

Longtime friend Robert Regnetta met Jackson through mutual friends in the restaurant industry in Boston. Regnetta said Jackson became a close family friend and opened up about his military experiences late in life, describing how he fought “from foxhole to foxhole, bush to bush” across the Philippines.

Regnetta said Jackson was extremely proud of his service to his country and the role the Montford Point Marines played in breaking down racial barriers. He treasured the Gold Medal and the letter and parade and touring the White House that same year.

Friends said Jackson’s family in Georgia plans private services for him in Savannah at a later date. Friends in Massachusetts are planning a memorial service as well after the COVID-19 crisis eases, perhaps to coincide with what would have been Jackson’s 100th birthday next June.

By: Rich Harbert Wicked Local

Mr. Jesse James Jackson
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