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Posthumous Congressional Gold Medal for Perris Man



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas (right) was on hand Feb. 25 at the presentation of the Congressional Gold Medal to the family of former Perris resident Tommie Hugh Denson. Others pictured in the photo include Kerry Denson, Tommie Denson, retired Marine Sgt. Michael Johnson, Western Regional Vice President of the Montford Point Marines Association; Denise Hains, Keith Denson and Karl Denson.

A Perris man who helped integrate African Americans into the U.S. Marine Corps has been honored posthumously with the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award bestowed by the United States.

Tommie Hugh Denson was among the first African Americans to enlist in the Marines during World War II, a time of rampant segregation in the military and America.

Like other black Marines, Denson endured bigotry and racism but never lost his love of country or the willingness to serve. Denson spent 23 years in the Marines, served in Korea and Vietnam in addition to World War II and retired as a gunnery sergeant.

He and his family later moved to Perris, where Denson purchased five acres on El Nido Road, spending his retirement gardening and raising chickens and cows and serving as an elder at the Perris Church of Christ. He died in 1999.

On Saturday, Feb. 25, five of his six children were on hand to accept the Congressional Gold Medal presented by the Montford Point Marine Association. The association represents Marines who served between 1942-49 at the segregated Montford Point Camp in North Carolina.



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas presents a Proclamation to the children of former resident Tommie Hugh Denson, who was recognized Feb. 25 with a Congressional Gold Medal for his efforts to integrate the Marine Corps during World War II. With Vargas are Denson's daughter, Denise Hains, of Murrieta; Keith Denson, of Canyon Country and Karl Denson, Encinitas.

Perris Mayor Michael Vargas attended the ceremony and presented the family with a proclamation honoring Denson's "selfless patriotism" commitment to civil rights and equality and for "future generations of warriors, regardless of background, to serve in the finest military the world has ever known."

In remarks made at the ceremony, Vargas called Denson "an icon and an inspiration to our youth and our entire community."

"The magnitude of what he did for or country is awesome," Vargas said. "It is very important that we acknowledge and honor those who have served and sacrificed for us. Mr. Denson has played a very significant role in our history."

Retired Marine Sgt. Michael Johnson presented Denson's children with the Congressional Gold Medal. Johnson said President Obama signed into law the legislation approving the Congressional Gold Medal in 2011 and a year later, 400 veterans received their medals in a ceremony in Washington D.C. Johnson said 20,000 African-Americans served at Montford Point prior to the integration of the Marine Corps in 1949.

About 1,000 Montford Point Marines are thought to be alive. Johnson serves as Western Regional Vice President of the Montford Point Marines Association.

Johnson summed up the contributions of the Montford Point Marines succinctly, "They changed the course of history," he said.



An up-close shot of the Congressional Gold Medal presented to the family of former Perris resident Tommie Hugh Denson, who spent his retirement years in the City gardening, raising chickens and cattle and serving his church. The hikers included Walter DeAngelo, who suffered a stroke last year and used the event as a form of physical therapy.

From Texas to the Marines

Tommie Hugh Denson was born in Paris, Texas in 1925.

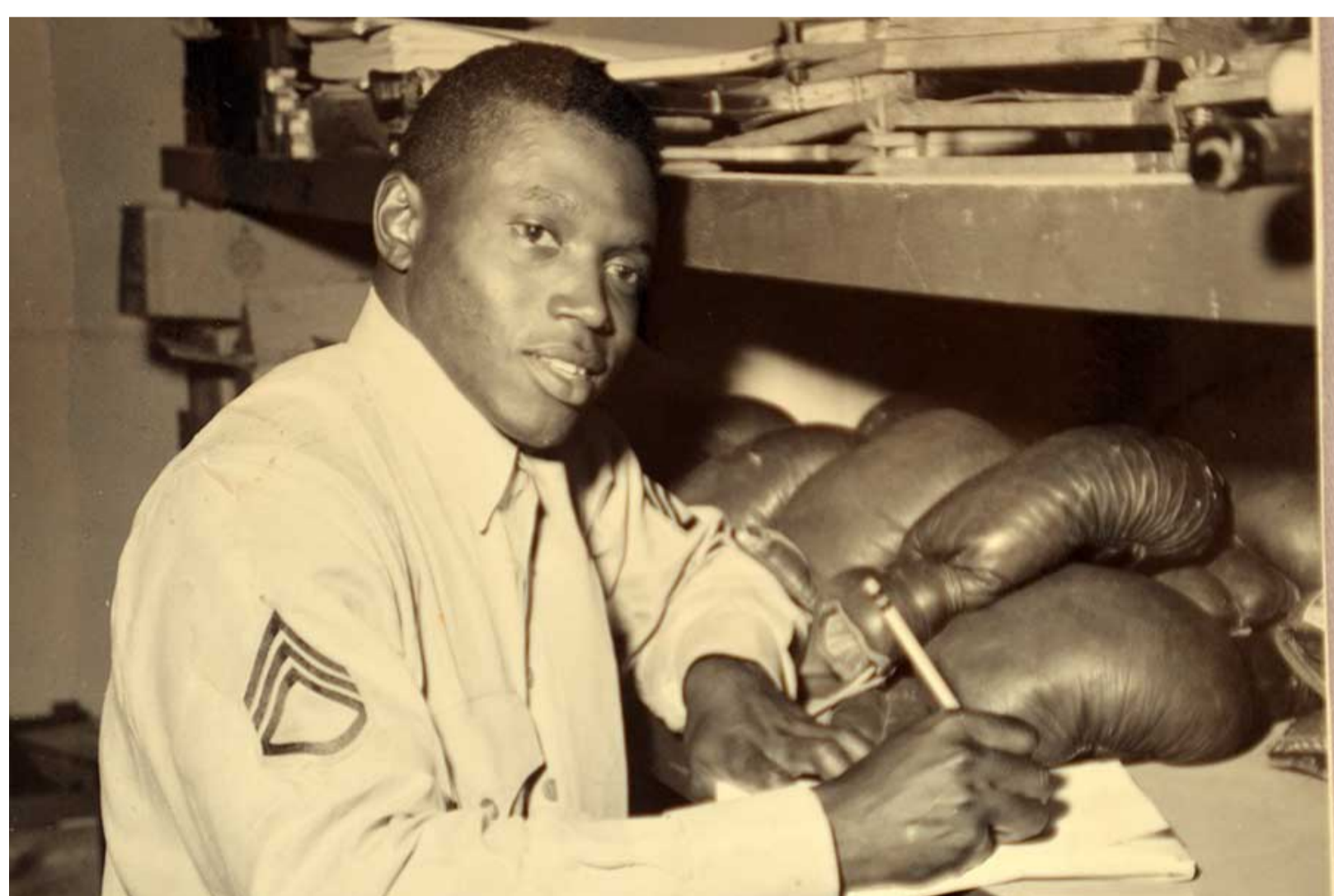
As a youngster, Denson commuted 26 miles to school on his bicycle daily and after classes, traveled to Camp Maxey to work. He liked the military, enlisted in the Marines in 1945 and was sent to Montford Point Camp.

He experienced Jim Crow bigotry up close and personal. Black Marines could not eat at many diners, drink at community water fountains and were forced to ride in the back of municipal buses. Montford Point Marines had to be accompanied by white officers when they left their base. The local population did not believe blacks could become Marines.

Despite the obstacles, Tommie Denson enjoyed the rigors and discipline of the Corps. He rose through the ranks, serving in Korea and two tours in Vietnam, earning several decorations and commendations along the way.

He and his wife, Sadie Mae Rhue, raised six children—Tommie, Kerry, Keith, Karl, Nita and Denise. All six children reside in Southern California. Sadie Denson died in 2009.

Family members recalled how Tommie Denson, when stationed at some far-off point while in the military, sent list of words home for his children to research and use correctly in sentences. He graded those assignments and sent back comments to the children. Despite the indignities heaped upon him in the segregated South, Denson maintained a wonderful sense of humor and was a first-class storyteller.



Former Perris resident Tommie Hugh Denson at work during his 23-year career with the U.S. Marine Corps.

Loved family, knowledge, Perris

Following his military retirement in 1968, Tommie Denson worked for General Electric and in 1978, realized his dream and purchased a homestead in Perris. As he settled into retirement, Denson took on the role of gentleman farmer and gardener and church leader.

His children remembered him as a man who, despite the bigotry he experienced, harbored no ill will toward the U.S.

His golden rule to his children about dealing with other people—don't judge someone based on comments you've heard about them; judge on how they treat you. His other pearl of wisdom: do what you say you're going to do and always do your best.

"Our dad was the kindest, most loving person," said his son, Kerry Denson, who lives in Perris. "He instilled in us the love of family, the love of knowledge and the freedom that knowledge gives you."

Kerry Denson called the Congressional Gold Medal Ceremony "one of the most important days in this family's life." He said the family appreciated the proclamation presented by Mayor Vargas, calling it "really beautiful and really gracious."

Daughter Denise Hains, who lives in Murrieta where the Congressional Gold Medal presentation ceremony took place, said her dad was a low-key pioneer in the struggle for civil rights. But he was a pioneer nonetheless.

"My father was part of a movement before there was a movement," she said. "It testifies to his character. My dad was bigger than life. I just wish he lived to see this day."



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas chats with Kerry Denson of Perris following the presentation of the Congressional Gold Medal posthumously to the family of Marine Gunnery Sgt. Tommie Hugh Denson. Vargas said Tommie Hugh Denson deserves the praise of all Americans: "The magnitude of what he did for or country is awesome."

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