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# J. Gary Cooper, the first black to lead Marine riflemen in combat, honored with military Path Breaker award

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By Renee Busby, Press-Register  
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Gen. J. Gary Cooper a member with 100 Black Men of Greater Mobile Inc. during the editorial board meeting at the Mobile Press-Register Wednesday May 18, 2011 in Mobile, Ala. (Press-Register, John David Mercer)

MOBILE, Alabama - A look at the list of J. Gary Cooper's accomplishments easily shows that he paved the way for others.

A retired U.S. Marine Corps major general, Cooper made history in 1966 when he became the first black to lead a Marine rifle company in combat. He received two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star for heroism during the Vietnam War.

In 1971, he became the first black officer to command a Marine Reserve unit, a Mobile-based reconnaissance company. He also was the first black to

attain the rank of general from Marine infantry ranks.

Now, the Department of the Navy has recognized the 74-year-old longtime Mobile businessman and civic leader as a historic Path Breaker.

Cooper was honored at the Navy's recent Tribute to African-American Leadership. A permanent exhibit in the Pentagon includes a section honoring Cooper and 10 others who broke racial barriers in the Marine Corps.

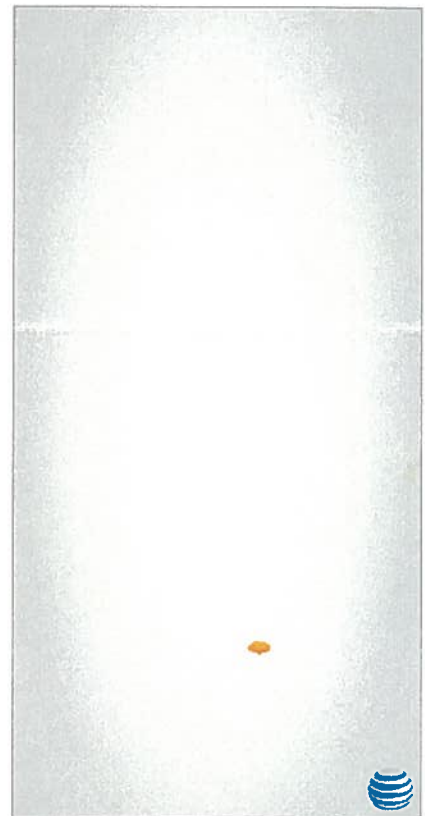
Cooper said one of the highlights of the ceremony, for him, was seeing other black Marine generals in the audience.

"When I became a Marine officer, there were 20,000 officers and six of us were black," said Cooper.

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The Marine Corps, said Cooper, was the last military branch to integrate.

"The President had to call and order the Marine Corps to follow the instructions," said Cooper, who has served as assistant secretary of the U.S. Air Force and as a U.S. ambassador to Jamaica.

"I would hope that seeing these accomplishments would lead some young man or woman to say 'Boy, if they can do it then I can do it now,'" said Cooper. "I hope I've been an inspiration to someone."

Mobile attorney Jim Atchison, a longtime friend, recalled a story Cooper shared about his first trip to the University of Notre Dame to attend school.

Atchison said Cooper was forced to ride on the back of the train because of his race.

"It didn't embitter him," said Atchison. "If anything, it made him stronger."

Atchison noted Cooper's strong leadership skills.

"He told me he would tell people in the military, 'If you're going to praise a soldier, praise him in front of others, and if you're going to criticize, do that in private.'"

Cooper said that one of his greatest thrills was leading Marines in combat during his Vietnam tour.

He also credited his success to the Marines at the segregated Montford Point training site adjacent to Camp Lejeune, a Marine training base in North Carolina. The first black Marine recruits took basic training at Montford Point in the 1940s.

"It's because of them I'm here today," said Cooper. "They were the real path breakers."

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