

*The following tribute to Reverend William Greason of Birmingham by Congressman Bachus and Congresswoman Terri Sewell (AL-7) appeared in the Congressional Record on May 18, 2012. Congressman Bachus presented Reverend Greason with a framed copy of the tribute during a program at Rickwood Field on May 30.*

As we commemorate Memorial Day 2012, it is an honor to join with my colleague Congresswoman Terri Sewell in recognizing the service given to our country by the Montford Point Marines and, in particular, the service of the Reverend William Greason of Birmingham, Alabama.

On November 23, 2011, President Obama signed legislation to award a collective Congressional Gold Medal, our nation's highest civilian award, to the Montford Point Marines. The Montford Point Marines earned this honor for their patriotic military service and their historic role in promoting the cause of equal rights in our country. This bill was forwarded to the floor by the Financial Services Committee and received the unanimous support of the House.

Like Alabama's famous Tuskegee Airmen, the Montford Point Marines fought for the principles of our democracy overseas at a time when prejudice and segregation prevented them from enjoying all of our country's freedoms here at home.

Our nation's first African American Marine recruits willingly stepped forward during World War II to serve and protect all Americans. Too often, they encountered racial discrimination that was as painful in its own way as a physical wound on the battlefield. But neither the sting of prejudice, nor the difficult training conditions at Camp Montford Point in North Carolina, nor battles in such places as Okinawa and Iwo Jima could break their morale or lessen their dedication to our country and our ideals.

The national gratitude expressed through the awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal was long overdue for a group of service members that totaled about 20,000 strong. In the beginning, the Montford Point Marines set out only to serve their country during a time of war. Through their valor, they changed the Marines and our military. They helped to change the social history of America as well.

The service of those soldiers raised a profound question: after fighting for freedom overseas, how could any American be denied full rights at home?

Today, Congresswoman Sewell and I have the special privilege to permanently memorialize in the records of the United States Congress Reverend William Greason of Birmingham, a true pioneer on Birmingham, the State of Alabama, and our nation. As a Montford Point Marine, he took part in the invasion of Iwo Jima. He answered the call of duty again during the Korean War.

For decades, we have celebrated “Bill” Greason as a ground-breaking baseball player, a star pitcher for the Birmingham Black Barons who mentored Willie Mays and who helped further break the color barrier in the Major Leagues as a member of the St. Louis Cardinals. He has displayed a continuing commitment to preserving the rich history of the Negro Leagues.

To the lasting good fortune of Birmingham and Alabama, Reverend Greason ultimately decided to devote his life to the ministry. Generations of families know him as a man of peace and service who has shared the word of our Lord as the pastor of Bethel Baptist Church and other faith communities.

It is fortuitous timing that the 2012 Rickwood Classic at Rickwood Field in Birmingham is paying tribute to “Wartime Baseball” during the week of Memorial Day. Reverend Greason stands as a giant on the field as a military veteran, a baseball star, and an inspiration for the city of Birmingham.

As the Congressional Gold Medal for the Montford Point Marines is issued, it is a special privilege to extend our fullest appreciation to Reverend William Greason and salute his exceptional life and service to his community and his country.

