

Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs hosts tribute to African American veterans

February 22 2017 1:08 PM



Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs

SPRINGFIELD — The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA) hosted a tribute to African American Veterans today at the James R. Thompson Center in Chicago. The ceremony honored all African American Veterans.

“We are here today to salute and honor all African-American Veterans. These brave veterans have served honorably in the United States Military beginning with our nation’s war for independence,” said IDVA Director Erica Jeffries. African American soldiers, sailors, airmen, coast guardsmen and Marines have participated in the Spanish American War, Philippine Insurrection, Mexican Expedition, WWI, WWII, the Korean War, Vietnam War, Persian Gulf War and our current war on terrorism. “They have served in peacetime and times of war. We thank them for their service to our country,” added Director Jeffries.

Several Montford Point Marine Veterans were in attendance at today’s ceremony. These veterans were the nation’s first African American Marines. From its inception until 1942, the Marine Corps refused to recruit African Americans, American

Indians and other minorities. Franklin D. Roosevelt's creation of the Fair Employment Practices Commission in 1941 forced the Corps, despite objections from its leadership, to begin recruiting African American Marines in 1942. The Marines' first black recruits received basic training at the segregated Montford Point Base adjacent to Camp Lejeune, NC and would continue to do so until 1949.

Commander Zeita Merchant was the keynote speaker at today's ceremony. Commander Merchant assumed duties as the Commanding Officer, Marine Safety Unit Chicago on July 8, 2016, after serving two years as Special Assistant to the Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard. In this position, she served as a principal advisor and direct representative on all matters pertaining to the daily and long-term administration of the Vice Commandant's schedule and enterprise management of the Coast Guard.