

A Black Colonel Takes Command of a Key Marine Corps Brigade

The assignment gives Col. Anthony Henderson, whose promotion to brigadier general takes effect in July, further opportunity for advancement in a service that has had few African-American leaders.



By Helene Cooper

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WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps on Tuesday put a Black colonel in charge of one of its key fighting brigades, the latest in a series of steps that positions the Marine, Col. Anthony Henderson, for future elevation to senior leadership positions.

Colonel Henderson, whose previously announced promotion to brigadier general will take effect in July, took command of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade during a ceremony at Camp Lejeune, N.C. “If anyone has a doubt” about what the group is, he said in accepting his new command, “it is intended to be ready. It is not here as a training tool or as an exercise tool. It is a fighting force.”

Colonel Henderson’s new command signals a commitment to providing him with a frontline opportunity to continue to rise through the ranks. And it comes as the Pentagon — and particularly the Marine Corps — is grappling with issues of race and the low number of African-American Marines in top leadership positions.

As a Black man with combat command experience in a service that has never in its 245-year history had a four-star officer who was not a white man, Colonel Henderson is a rarity in the Corps: an African-American with a chance of making it to the top of the service.

Only 25 African-Americans have reached general in any form in the Marine Corps, and only one other — Brig. Gen. Calvert L. Worth — is currently an active-duty infantry general, a group from which the Corps draws much of its senior leadership.

Colonel Henderson, 53, was passed over three times for brigadier general. In 2019, the Navy secretary, Richard V. Spencer, even added a handwritten recommendation to his candidacy. But the promotion board declined to elevate him each time and instead forwarded slates made up primarily of white men.

Current and former Marines pointed to Colonel Henderson's tendency to speak his mind as an explanation for why he was passed over, but those traits have not disqualified white colonels. The Corps' decision to add Colonel Henderson to its list of brigadier generals came after an examination of his career by The New York Times.

The decision to finally promote him to brigadier general, announced in March, was significant because many Black Marines who make general do not have the command combat experience of Colonel Henderson, who had multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. So those officers often find that they lack the background necessary to reach senior leadership, and they often end up in positions where they hit invisible ceilings.

Black Marines said they hoped that Colonel Henderson would break that cycle.

"This command opportunity keeps Tony relevant and is very visible to the Marine Corps," said Lt. Gen. Ronald L. Bailey, who was the first Black man to command the 1st Marine Division, from 2011 to 2013, before he retired. "Bottom line: He's in the middle of the action."

During the ceremony at Camp Lejeune, Lt. Gen. Brian D. Beaudreault, the commander of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force, alluded to his new deputy's tendency to say what he thinks.

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Senior Marine leaders, General Beaudreault said, must be willing to speak truth to power. "You've got to lay it out there; that's what is expected of general officers — to speak the truth," he said. "With Tony, there's never any doubt."

There were chuckles from the crowd.

Colonel Henderson, who declined to be interviewed for The Times article in August and could not be reached for comment on Tuesday, vowed in his remarks that he would work to ensure that his brigade — which fought key battles in Nasiriyah during the Iraq war and in Marja in Afghanistan — would answer the call when it came. “We will not fail when you call us,” he said, “whether it’s required to be ready in minutes, hours or days.”

Colonel Henderson’s new command comes at a delicate time for the United States military as a whole, and for the Marines in particular.

The Pentagon, which for the first time has a Black secretary of defense, is facing a reckoning on race after the Capitol assault on Jan. 6 laid bare the deep inroads that extremist groups have made into the military, both active duty and retired: A number of the rioters with ties to extremist groups also have ties to military service.

This has also been the case with the Marine Corps. Senior Defense Department officials who have pored over videos from the Capitol riot have noted that the Marine Corps flag was among the Confederate battle flags and QAnon symbols displayed.

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