

A close-up portrait of Paul Katzeff, an older Black man with white curly hair, wearing glasses and a suit. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a thoughtful expression.

PAUL KATZEFF

MARVIN GILMORE

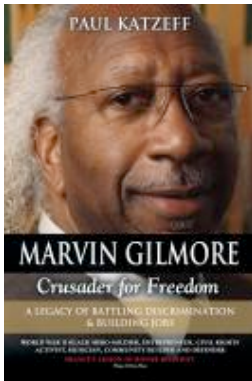
Crusader for Freedom

A LEGACY OF BATTLING DISCRIMINATION
& BUILDING JOBS

WORLD WAR II BLACK HERO-SOLDIER, ENTREPRENEUR, CIVIL RIGHTS
ACTIVIST, MUSICIAN, COMMUNITY BUILDER AND DEFENDER

FRANCE'S LEGION OF HONOR RECIPIENT

Photos © Don West



This is the action-filled biography of Marvin E. Gilmore, Jr., an African-American musician-turned-businessman, the grandson of slaves, who rose from poverty to achieve the American dream. He's a decorated U.S. war hero who earned France's Legion of Honor and he has waged a life-long battle against racism and for jobs-creation. This book describes battles with armed segregationists, and making music with Hollywood stars. Gilmore has also played a key role in helping Boston outgrow its racial divisions.

Marvin Gilmore: Crusader for Freedom

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What readers say about the biography of Marvin Gilmore:

“There are many heroes in the story of Boston's remarkable revival, and one of them is Marvin Gilmore. In fact, his story should be an inspiration to every young person in this country who wants to do great things. A black kid from Cambridge, he overcame unbelievable obstacles in a racist America to succeed in business and, more importantly, as a tireless and relentless civic leader. He is also an inspiration to those of us who are approaching old age – still working, still pushing, still making the world a better place as he celebrates his 90th birthday.”

- *Michael Dukakis, twice Governor of Massachusetts (1975-1979, 1983-1991) and the 1988 Democratic nominee for President of the United States*

“When you read this book about Marvin Gilmore you will learn a lot about history, a lot about Marvin Gilmore, and a lot about the progress that has been made in race relations. This book is important and should be read by everyone. You will be inspired and impressed by the life of Marvin Gilmore – an Army veteran, a community organizer, a businessman, a faithful and loyal citizen of Cambridge. I recommend this book with great enthusiasm.”

- *Charles J. Ogletree, Jr., Jesse Climenko Professor of Law, Harvard Law School, and Founding & Executive Director, Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice*

“This book brings to life the qualities that make Marvin Gilmore a great citizen. Those of us who know and work with Marvin witness daily his labors to promote racial harmony and to heal communities. Marvin understands that racial harmony is underpinned by socio-economic success, and this book shows how Marvin learned that truth. It also showed me where Marvin got his guts and grit, his vision and his leadership. *Find the money*, Marvin says. *Create jobs... Nurture communities... Believe in the unbelievable...* Wonderful anecdotes that show how Marvin became Marvin.”

- *Jeanette Clough, President and CEO, Mt. Auburn Hospital*

MARVIN GILMORE:

Crusader for Freedom

**A Legacy of Battling Discrimination &
Building Jobs**

**World War II Black Hero-Soldier, Entrepreneur, Civil Rights
Activist, Musician, Community Builder and Defender**

Paul Katzeff

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: DEFENDER OF THE DOWNTRODDEN.....	1
A DOOR TO WAR	3
FIGHTER FOR FREEDOM	6
FIGHTING SEVERAL WARS	7
THE FIGHT AT HOME.....	9
THE BOSTON BATTLER.....	10
NEW ACTIVITIES.....	13
CHAPTER 1: FAMILY TREE	17
SCRAPING OUT A LIVING.....	18
LIFE DURING TOUGH TIMES	20
PATERNAL SIDE	21
UNRAVELING THE MYSTERY.....	26
PASSING THE TORCH	26
CHAPTER 2: MIGRATION TO BOSTON	29
CALL FROM THE SHERIFF	30
A CHILLING LESSON	32
GREAT MIGRATION NORTH	34
WORK ETHIC	35
CHAPTER 3: BOYHOOD IN CAMBRIDGE.....	37
NEIGHBORHOOD WITH COHESION.....	39
MARVIN’S DAILY ROUTINE	43
DRESSED FOR SUCCESS	45
SUMMERS IN CLEVELAND	49
VISITING FAMILY IN ALABAMA.....	52
MARVIN’S CAMBRIDGE.....	60
CHAPTER 4: LEE AUGUSTA DISCOVERS REAL ESTATE.....	63
A NEW BEGINNING.....	64

“SAVINGS HOLOCAUST”	65
CREATING A WIN-WIN SITUATION	68
A DISNEY CHARACTER	78
DOING WELL BY DOING GOOD.....	79
CHAPTER 5: YOU’RE IN THE ARMY NOW	81
CALL OF DUTY.....	82
THE VANISHING DEAL.....	85
IN A SWAMP.....	87
THE BIGGEST JERK HE MET	88
DEADLY SERIOUS	89
WORK AND PLAY AT CAMP STEWART	91
VISITS TO SAVANNAH	93
COMING TO BLOWS	94
WAR WITHIN A WAR.....	96
BATTLE AT CAMP STEWART	96
MARVIN’S MOVE	101
CHAPTER 6: MARVIN’S WAR	105
WAR-TIME ROMANCE.....	106
NEW IDENTITY, SAME LETHAL SKILLS.....	109
SHIPPING OUT	110
PRACTICE, MORE PRACTICE	113
PLANE SPOTTING.....	115
SURROUNDED BY ENEMIES	116
AT WAR	118
CHAPTER 7: A SWISS-ARMY-KNIFE SOLDIER	123
MORTUARY DETAIL.....	123
SLOGGING IT OUT.....	124
ROLL CALL.....	127
DISCOVERING THE BLACK MARKET	128
MARVIN GILMORE, COMPANY CLERK	129
RED BALL EXPRESS.....	130
SPILLING BLOOD.....	135
“SUPERMAN” MEETS KRYPTONITE.....	137

MARVIN GILMORE: Crusader for Freedom

FINDING HIS OUTFIT	138
SUICIDAL ORDER	140
TICKET TO THE STOCKADE.....	142
GOOD-BYE TO GERMANY.....	145
ROYAL SCOTTISH ACADEMY.....	149
DISCRIMINATION NOT VANQUISHED	150
CHAPTER 8: AN ENTREPRENEUR RISES IN THE POSTWAR DECADES	155
FINISHING HIGH SCHOOL	157
RECONNECTING WITH HELEN GREEN	158
SHATTERED SOULS.....	159
UNCLE EDMUND	160
LESTER’S WAR	161
COLLEGE AT NEW ENGLAND CONSERVATORY	165
NODDING OFF	168
FIRST MARRIAGE	169
MULTITASKING MUSICIAN.....	169
BETTER HARMONY.....	172
MAKING MUSIC	174
KNOWING WHEN TO SAY NO	175
BUILDING ON REAL ESTATE.....	176
BROKER BUSINESS	179
DEMERITS DEBATE.....	179
MARRIAGE TO LORNA LANGER	181
ANOTHER FIRST.....	187
PUBLIC SERVICE.....	189
CHAPTER 9: RECRUITING “MR. SHOW BUSINESS”	193
THE SHOW WENT ON	197
CHAPTER 10: FIGHTING THE CIVIL RIGHTS BATTLES OF THE 1960S.....	201
MARTYRED IN MISSISSIPPI.....	204
PASSING THE BATON	208
CALL FOR HELP.....	212
A PLAN TAKES SHAPE	215
INTO THE SHOOTING GALLERY.....	218

NO ARMED ESCORT	223
WHITE MEN WITH GUNS	227
WATCHED BY SPIES.....	230
“NIGGER, DON’T MOVE”	233
CHAPTER 11: MARVIN GILMORE, IMPRESARIO	237
A PLAN TAKES SHAPE.....	238
THE HARD PART	238
SURRENDER, OR...?	239
BLUES CLUB	241
MUSIC CAME FIRST	242
BIRACIAL CROWDS.....	244
FUN-HOUSE LAYOUT.....	245
NO FANFARE	246
CHANGING FASHIONS.....	247
“MAYOR” GILMORE.....	249
CHAPTER 12: COMMUNITY LEADER	251
MARVIN JOINS THE CDC OF BOSTON	253
A NEW DIRECTION FOR THE CDC	255
LANDING A TECHNOLOGY GIANT	258
CROSSTOWN’S EVOLUTION	261
PLANTING SEEDS	264
REPLACING THE SOUTHWEST CORRIDOR	265
A BETTER IDEA EMERGES	267
BREAKING A LOGJAM	270
LEGACY OF HELP FOR WORKING MEN AND WOMEN	273
UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION	275
CHAPTER 13: MORE GIVING BACK.....	277
SECRET POLICE?	277
STICKING TO THE MISSION.....	278
LOSING THEIR SHADOWS	279
HAVES AND HAVE-NOTS	280
HELPING OTHERS HELP THEMSELVES.....	282
BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY	283

MARVIN GILMORE: Crusader for Freedom

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, BOSTON.....	288
NEW ENGLAND CONSERVATORY.....	290
CHAPTER 14: TWINKLE IN HIS EYE.....	293
DEFYING JIM CROW	294
“HIGH ESTEEM”	294
PAYING TRIBUTE.....	296
CONTINUING AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN LEGACY	297
SAYING THANKS	300
MARVIN’S KARMA	301
TOM BROKAW	302
DAY OF HONOR.....	302
ENCORE	303
FRENCH CONNECTION	304
APPENDIX A: WHO OWNED MARVIN’S ANCESTORS?	311
PICTURE PUZZLE	312
FAMILY TIES	315
THE 93 RD HOME.....	316
FOLLOWING THE CLUES	318
DID HOWELL ROWELL OWN JERIMIAH?	320
APPENDIX B: SLAVERY’S BRUTAL ENFORCEMENT.....	327
PHOTO ALBUM	333
ENDNOTES.....	351

Introduction

Defender of the Downtrodden

Even before dawn's light leaked into the sky on June 6, 1944, 19-year-old Marvin E. Gilmore, Jr., knew exactly what was going on and so did all of his buddies. Any soldier could tell this was the real deal. It was D-Day. The invasion. None of them needed G.I. ESP.

Marvin was in a landing ship, steaming toward the beach of Normandy, France. Inside, the ship was shaped like a foxhole. It had sheer walls on the sides and steep ones front and back, made of steel. It offered a semblance of a foxhole's shelter, too. Below deck was jam packed with trucks and mobile artillery. A man could hunker down between those hulking vehicles and weapons and feel pretty safe, surrounded on all sides by thick steel machines, as far away as possible from the open sea air and the risk of enemy bullets and shrapnel and cannon shells.

But no one was taking cover in the bowels of this ship. Marvin and his buddies – the guys who had trained together as the all-black 458th Anti-Aircraft Artillery (Automatic Weapons) Battalion¹ – were all gathered on deck, along the rail, exposed to whatever might come so they could see the historically large fight unfolding all around them. They were surrounded by hundreds – no, *thousands* – of American and other Allied ships. On some, heavy deck guns were pounding the German beach defenses. Each time they fired, a flash of flame bloomed for an instant from their barrels. Moments later each gun's report reach him with a thunder clap – some loud, the distant ones soft – punching into Marvin's ears.

When morning light finally appeared, it revealed a cross, storm-tossed sea with a low, tight cloud cover. Ocean and air and clouds and the distant beach all looked gray and grim to Marvin. And minute by minute, the sullen scene grew more clamorous.

Marvin saw snub-nosed landing boats packed with assault troops plowing through choppy, ashen waters toward the beach. Soon a steady, fierce shower of German fire and metal began to greet them, raking them from cliffs above the beach. He could make out the muscular humps of

some of the concrete bunkers shielding the Germans. Smoke and mist and distance obscured Marvin's view. The roll of the ship also made it hard to see details far away on shore. But even from here he could see that amphibious landing boats were swimming into a shooting gallery.

The time for Marvin and his buddies to hit the beach was getting near too. But despite the angry weather and choppy violence exploding all around them, no one was ducking for safety into the ship's foxhole of a hold. Hide out below deck? These guys were young. They were a primed fighting force, itching to see action. Avoid trouble? These guys *were* trouble, trouble for the enemy, part of a giant maul that was smashing down on the Germans defending this string of beaches in northwestern France.

"We had been in our ship a good 10 or 12 days," Marvin said decades later, recounting that long day of the landing.² "We had been waiting for orders, waiting for something to happen. Now all of a sudden you could not even see the water. There were so many other ships around us. We had all crossed the English Channel toward France. Now the water was black with ships. There were so many ships, you couldn't even see the water. We were anchored. But we all knew what this was without getting the word from officers. So we were waiting for orders to move forward, waiting for our turn to land."

There was one ominous sign. "My skin had turned white from the salt spray after so many days on the ship," he said. "I looked like a ghost."

Stinging salt saturated the sea air, whipped up by wild water and wind, the inclement weather that top Allied commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower was using as a brilliant screen. *Invade Normandy?* the German high command asked itself. *In this weather? Impossible!* Besides, the Germans *knew* the invasion would come in Pas-de-Calais, about 130 miles to the northeast. The town of Calais overlooks the Strait of Dover, the narrowest part of the English Channel. This was the shortest, quickest route across the Channel for an invasion force. And the town itself was a port, whose facilities would be vital for landing men and war supplies.

And so at this moment, Marvin had a front-row seat to history in the making. His outfit was lined up to land on the stretch of Normandy codenamed "Utah," one of five beaches in a row targeted by the Allies. He was about to become one of 1,800 African-American soldiers to storm the virtual fortress that Germany had erected on France's Atlantic coast.³

“We couldn’t see much on the beach even as we got closer,” Marvin said. “There was so much smog and smoke. But we could hear everything! There were constant loud noises and explosions, shooting and firing.”

Like the lower deck, the open-air upper deck was crowded with vehicles except along the rail, which is where the men were gathered. From where Marvin watched, the Germans’ reinforced concrete walls and massive-walled bunkers had low profiles. “We couldn’t see much. But I could make out some of their gun turrets,” Marvin said. “And in the air we saw German and American airplanes. I could see dog fights.”⁴

The overall seaborne assault began at 6:30 in the morning.⁵ For Marvin, waiting seemed to take forever, but he recalls that it was actually still morning when his ship nosed towards the beach.

When the ship was well into its beach approach, Marvin and the other men manned their vehicles. Drivers revved their truck engines. All conversation died.

“We had no sense of how good or bad things were going on the beach,” Marvin said. “We started our trucks when we got orders. Then no one was talking. We were all listening for orders from our commanders. There was no talking as we got near the beachhead.”

When the landing ship got close enough, it dropped its trailing anchor. This was the ship’s lifeline. The vessel was built with a nearly flat bottom, and was designed to beach itself to offload its cargo. Later, when that job was done, a shipboard winch would strain on the anchor, buried in the shallow sea bottom far enough astern so the ship could haul herself back to sea.

Now the ship finally skidded up onto the Normandy mudflat.

A Door to War

The next minutes fused together like hot molten metal, like time compressed in an explosion. The ship’s bow doors parted with a gasp as loud and startling as a starter’s gun. They kept opening, spreading apart like the wings of an angel about to take flight. But they were accompanied by a hellish sound. Motors squealed as gears and chains slid heavy steel ramps forward. The ramps clattered and screamed as they slid over the ship’s thin steel skin. The men of the 458th had practiced this debarkation dozens of times, but no rehearsals could capture the pressure on them

now as the battle howled all around them, with the course of the war itself hanging in the balance.

Inside the belly of the ship, trucks and caissons lurched forward, wheeling their way down the steel ramps. “When that ramp went down, we hit the beach like lightning!” Marvin said.

There was scant room for error. Vehicles and wheeled weapons had to be steered straight and true down the ramps. Veering mere inches to either side would send heavy equipment careening off a ramp, fouling the disembarkation, delaying anti-aircraft weapons urgently needed to rake enemy fighters and bombers from the sky, now and in the hours, days, and months ahead.

As Marvin’s truck plowed onto the beach, he heard the murderous music of war. Drum rolls of machinegun fire came from several directions. The booming kettle drums of artillery pressed air into his ears. Aircraft engines overhead whined like out-of-tune trombones.

“Off in the distance I saw American and German planes in dog fights,” Marvin said. “Over us I was really glad to see barrage balloons. That helped keep German airplanes from strafing the beach. I was told later the balloon outfit was another all-black unit.”

Metal cables tethered the balloons to a winch truck or some other vehicle. Enemy aircraft couldn’t strafe the men, ships, and equipment on the beach without being sliced and diced by the cables. That forced them to fly ineffectively high, or avoid what would have been their deadliest maneuver, low altitude aerial runs along the length of the shore.

The balloons shielding Marvin’s section of beach probably were floated by the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion (VLA) – for very low altitude.⁶ Military author Jonathan Gawne wrote that the 320th was the first barrage balloon unit in France and the first black unit in the segregated American Army to come ashore on D-Day.

Marvin’s anti-aircraft artillery outfit began to move its heavy gear up the sand dunes and beyond. They followed the path punched through the German defenses by American infantry at great cost in lives and limbs.

The outcome of this Allied invasion was by no means certain. It could still be stopped cold, the beachhead transformed into a congested killing ground, a bloody bottleneck awash with the gore of young Americans and Britons and Canadians. Marvin knew he could easily end up dead, drowned, and dismembered at any instant. But he was free of fear.

“There was no fear in any of the soldiers,” Marvin said. “We were too young. We were too fired up. Even as the day moved on and we had to pick up a lot of dead soldiers and put them on trucks, that fear never existed.”

Months of practice kicked in.

“We spent a lot of time in England training, practicing what we would do,” Marvin said. “Now it was time. All the men were fired up to get there and attack the Germans. There was no sense of fear. We were all too busy doing our jobs, moving to the fight, protecting ourselves.”

Did he know how much peril he was in? “Yes, it was dangerous,” Marvin said. “But I was too busy to think about it. In a way it was either kill or be killed. You didn’t stand around thinking about whether you’d be alive or dead. You were fired up to move forward and kill the enemy. It never dawned on me I could be dead in the next day or the next hour or the next minute. Or the next second. That’s why the Army chooses young men! They never think about dying.”

Marvin was in an anti-aircraft battalion, but like any soldier he had endured harsh months in boot camp and later training, training with weapons and in hand-to-hand combat. He had been toughened by long marches, by oppressive heat, by fierce swamps, by mad-man drill instructors.

His outfit had moved its heavy guns forward, off the beach and toward the adjacent countryside, which was divided into a checkerboard pattern of farm plots delineated by hedgerows. Each hedgerow was an earthen embankment roughly six and a half feet tall, with a flat top surface. Beech, oak, and chestnut trees sprouted from the crown of each embankment. Thick, tall, and steep, the hedgerows formed walls that would make the advance of Allied tanks and artillery and anti-aircraft guns extremely difficult in the hours and days ahead. They would slow the American-led rescue invasion. German machine-gunners could mow down infantry daring to enter a field at a corner, where there were gaps in the hedgerows.⁷

The main duty of Marvin’s outfit was to shoot German warplanes out of the sky. But Marvin and his brothers in arms were also ready to defend themselves from German foot soldiers. Marvin carried two handguns, a carbine, a bayonet, and a dozen hand grenades. “In all of our training leading up to that day, we were never trained to be afraid,” he said. “You

were trained to be a victor and win. I never thought I wouldn't see my mother or father or America again. It *never* entered my mind. As bad as the war and the situation was, I never thought about that. If I had, *then* I would be afraid."

Then, somehow, the day came to a close. The day was all mad order, it was all angry chaos. It had ended moments after it had begun. It had taken an eternity. Everything had gone as planned. Nothing had gone right. Finally, Marvin's sergeant, Edward O. DeWitt, ordered, *Get some shut-eye*. Marvin had a small pup tent, but instead he looked for a tree on top of the nearest hedgerow. Deliberately, he sat on the ground with his back against the trunk. His back covered, he checked one .45-caliber handgun, then the other. Both were loaded. On both, the safety was off. He holstered them. He fingered the bayonet sheathed on his belt. It was still there. He prayed he would not abruptly find himself in a wrestling match to the death with a stranger in the blinding darkness of night. But if some such horror occurred, he wanted every weapon possible.

He took a deep breath to calm himself, then checked his M1 carbine for the umpteenth time that day.⁸ A magazine of bullets was still properly clipped in place. Without looking, he brushed the fingertips of his right hand across several hand grenades that were clipped to a bandolier across his chest. It was a quick act of reassurance. Just checking to make sure they were still there. There was no need for him to actually do anything with them. It was all part of a routine that had become second nature, a sort of combat countdown in the dark French night. Marvin was armed and primed.

Fighter for Freedom

Marvin's biography is the story of a fighter. He has fought to win a better life for himself and his family. That struggle has been all the more difficult because Marvin had to battle bigotry every step of the way. Yet those challenges have never kept Marvin from fighting for other people as well, helping them escape oppression and improve their lives, whether it is his black brothers and sisters in America or the victims of German tyranny during World War II.

Marvin was born in 1924. His story traces his ancestry back through generations of slaves in Alabama and South Carolina. Marvin's success and achievements are the fulfillment of his forbearers' hopes and dreams. So is

his freedom to fight discrimination, a fight he comes back to again and again.

As a boy, Marvin heard his grandparents' stories about the brutality, beatings, rape, poverty, and fear they had endured as Southern slaves. His parents exercised stern authority at home as they sought to instill discipline in him. They wanted to forge in him the self-control they were sure he would need to study hard and achieve the financial freedom that had been denied to previous generations of Gilmores and, on his mother's side, O'Neals.

When Nazis threatened to enslave Europe, Marvin joined the Army before he reached enlistment age. He was young, but he recognized racist fanaticism when he saw it in newsreels and newspaper stories. He understood exactly where it led, to the same sort of suffering, violent oppression, and slavery his grandparents had suffered. He understood that Hitler's rabid ideology of racial hatred was his family's old enemy, back again, a menace not only to Europeans but also a threat to throw Marvin back in time to an evil place of pain and suffering, fear and deprivation that his grandparents had warned him about.

Still, Marvin was steeling himself to fight for more than racial justice. He had grown up in a multiethnic neighborhood. His friends were a Noah's Ark of different ethnicities, skin colors, and religions. Everyone was different. But they treated each other the same.

Marvin knew this new tyrant in Europe was a menace to black Americans. He also knew he was a threat to his home, to his entire country. This mustached maniac was a danger to his neighborhood and his buddies. America was a place Marvin loved, the nation he would fight for. Enlisting was a no-brainer. It was only in a distant recess of his mind that he admitted maybe, just maybe, he might have to pay some horrible price.

Fighting Several Wars

Like so many other African-Americans, Marvin embraced what black America called the Double V Campaign: victory against dictatorships abroad and victory against racism at home.⁹ He would willingly risk life and limb in foreign lands to secure his opportunity to win full citizenship rights at home – for himself and for his fellow African-Americans.

He held to those convictions in southern Army training camps as he came face-to-face with organized discrimination far more severe than

anything he had experienced back home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he had grown up in a racially and ethnically mixed community. Despite the bigotry that he encountered, Marvin was instrumental in calming a race riot at Camp Stewart in Georgia, one of the military's worst instances of racial conflict during World War II.

From the moment he found himself barred from an Army bus because he was black, Marvin was fighting several wars at once. He battled white segregationists. He skirmished with poor Southern black G.I.s, who resented Northern black soldiers who were better educated and had not been raised to fear whites, even armed whites. And once he got to Europe, he was in combat against the German war machine – the *wehrmacht*. From his first day in France – D-Day, the Normandy invasion – he slept with his weapons so that he would always be able to defend himself, whether the foe was American or German.

In one battle, Marvin suffered severe wounds that landed him in a field hospital. Here too he had to fend off attacks by fellow soldiers. He escaped harm because he had his handgun handy. Once he was healthy enough to return to action, rather than risk random assignment to an unfamiliar outfit he stole a jeep, then two more, as he scouted his way back to his old unit at the front.

During most of the war, Marvin was attached to Gen. George Patton's Third Army, fighting its way across northwest Europe. Periodically, his outfit got moved around to fill gaps in manpower. For a while Marvin was conscripted into the Red Ball Express, the emergency trucking shuttle the Army set up to move war supplies to the front. The conveyor belt on wheels became an urgent need when gung-ho generals like Patton and the First Army's Courtney Hodges outran their supplies of bullets, gasoline, cannon shells. Three quarters of the Red Ball's drivers and mechanics were black G.I.s.¹⁰

German soldiers certainly were not the only threats to Marvin during the war. War-time tensions could turn a "routine" clash with a racist G.I. into a fatal encounter. Danger lurked even away from the front. In Glasgow, white military police tried to ambush Marvin simply because he was black. Black marketers, both in the Army and outside its ranks, were willing to kill honest soldiers like Marvin rather than risk letting them foul up their lucrative underground trade.

Marvin had tumbled into a nightmare world. Many of its denizens were vicious men who hated and feared him, some because he was black, some because he was honest, all because he was not one of them. It was a world of chaos. It was a world where a man like Marvin could be killed and his death might not even be noticed amid the rampant carnage. It was a world overflowing with armed men trained to maim and kill, many driven mad by the horrors of combat. They would slay or cripple someone like Marvin just because he was there.

And racism did not disappear once the European war was won. Marvin was turned away from the troop ship that was supposed to transport him and other soldiers home. He was barred from boarding with the admonition that only white soldiers were allowed onboard.

Finally, Marvin returned home. But his battles were certainly not done.

The Fight at Home

On the personal front, Marvin fought to complete the education he had interrupted to join the war effort. He worked part-time to earn money while he finished high school. He took odd jobs, performed house cleaning, and washed and polished cars for wealthy whites. The drudgery and put-downs with not-so-subtle racial undertones convinced him that when he was done with school, he would only work for himself, never for other people.

He went through a similar routine in college at the prestigious New England Conservatory. Marvin studied piano and percussion at the music-oriented school. He added catering and playing in bands to his income-earning sidelines. He also worked the graveyard shift at a mental hospital as an orderly. There, he found himself caring for Sam Langford, a black boxing champion who had gone blind and broke. Langford was not mentally ill, but the aging, broken down black man had somehow been swept into the facility, like something society had thrown away.

Marvin realized who the old pugilist was, and he was happy to comfort him. But Langford's sorry state was another life lesson for Marvin. It was important for a black adult to be financially independent, able to take care of himself and his loved ones.

Marvin developed into an excellent musician – and an outstanding caterer. He ran social functions in suburban Boston, several of which the

president of prestigious Brandeis University attended. Impressed by Marvin's panache, he offered him a job as his campus-residence butler. Marvin was flattered but he declined. He had loftier goals in mind.

He was already at work on one of them. Years earlier, in the depths of the Depression, his family lived in a modest Cambridge rooming house. When their landlady fell into foreclosure, Marvin's mother purchased the building. Basically, she swapped her meager bank account for the building. Through the following years she slowly added to her rental real estate holdings. She did it by creating a market for herself.

She heard that ambitious young black students at Harvard University could not obtain campus housing; the Ivy League school discriminated against them. So Marvin's mother spread the word that she would provide housing. Through church groups and the rest of her social network, she promoted her rooms and apartments as housing for worthy students. Sure enough, she attracted tenants (a few of whom were white) who went on to include a Nobel Prize winner, judges, a Presidential cabinet secretary, two U.S. ambassadors, a Nieman Fellow at Harvard, and a future wife of singer Nat "King" Cole. Among her non-student tenants briefly: Martin Luther King Sr., father of the civil rights icon.

Marvin made friends with many. The expertise of several proved invaluable in helping to solve problems during Marvin's decades as an adult businessman.

Meanwhile, as a young adult, Marvin helped his mother run her properties. He continued to learn business lessons from his mother. She emphasized the value of fiscal caution and never taking on debt. He applied those lessons as he began to buy his own properties. Those became the foundation for his financial self-sufficiency.

The Boston Battler

The family to which he would devote so much of his energy began with his 1959 wedding. Lorna Langer, a brilliant Harvard-educated biochemist who happened to be white and Jewish, was the love of Marvin's life. Marvin was her first black friend. Their wedding took place despite the strident opposition of Lorna's mother. Their marriage lasted until death parted them after 48 years.

The 1960s were the decade of civil rights battles and flower power. Marvin blossomed in the fight for racial equality.

He was chairman of the life-membership committee of the Boston branch of the NAACP. Marvin could have invented the Boy Scouts' slogan, "Be prepared." He's had a lifelong habit of working long hours and starting his labors early. He was routinely early to NAACP branch meetings so that he could review notes and organize his thoughts for the upcoming session. That passion for preparation paved the way for a chance conversation with Charles Evers, brother of slain activist Medgar Evers and an NAACP official in Mississippi. After their brainstorming session, Marvin teamed up with professional basketball superstar Bill Russell to visit Jackson in the state of Mississippi – the heart of segregationist darkness – within days of enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Their agenda was to seek service in restaurants and hotels, which under the new law could no longer bar customers due to their race. The duo spent five days in Jackson, in a constant game of cat-and-mouse with armed segregationists who were out to scare them out of town – or kill them.

But despite the risks, their mission was a success. They broke the color barrier in several places. They brought the light of publicity to a community that had used intimidation and violence to repress its black residents. They delivered hope to an oppressed black citizenry.

Later that same summer, Marvin – who had spent enough time as a jazz musician to know his way around a performance hall – took a train to Philadelphia and talked his way backstage and into Sammy Davis, Jr.'s dressing room in the theater where he was rehearsing *Golden Boy*. Marvin's mission: talk the headliner into performing for free at a fundraiser for the Boston branch of the NAACP. Would his gambit work?

In business, the 1960s saw Marvin diversify his activities and sources of income. The bonus was that he did it in a way that enabled him to combine work and pleasure. He had been forced to abandon a career as a musician as a young man because it was an unreliable way to earn a living and because of bias against black talent. Now, in his forties, he recognized a way to get back in. Driving his red Jaguar through Cambridge one day, he was struck by a neighborhood that was pockmarked by seedy bars.

They were the neighborhood's lament. But to Marvin they suddenly looked like an opportunity. Could he buy one and turn it into a high-class nightclub, showcasing top-notch bands, welcoming mixed audiences of blacks and whites? Would he have tried if he had known in advance how

he'd be harassed and hassled by city authorities who couldn't bear to see a black man succeed?

Discrimination was a never-ending plague in all of his businesses. Repeatedly during the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, banks refused to lend him money. Banks always seemed more concerned with his black skin than the fact that his balance sheets were written in black ink, not red. His solution sprang from his entrepreneurial vision. He organized a campaign to establish the first minority-owned commercial bank in New England.

Marvin was a hot commodity. Governors and mayors appointed him to public boards that counseled the state and big cities on issues ranging from housing for the poor to racial harmony. Charities vied for his presence on their boards of directors. Michael Dukakis, a rising politician who would eventually run for President, became a friend.

At the outset of the 1970s, Marvin's growing reputation led to his being hired to head the nonprofit Community Development Corporation of Boston. His appointment occurred just as President Richard Nixon was dismantling the federal Model Cities Program, which had supported CDCs around the U.S.

During a cross-country tour of CDCs around the country, Marvin realized that the only way his CDC could survive was by reinventing itself. Marvin's guiding principal was that the best way for the CDC to help any struggling community is with jobs. Their benefits are longer lasting than handouts. But *how* to reinvent itself? What roadmap for resurrection did he find?

Marvin's community activism did not stop there. Community groups blocked a huge interstate highway from plowing through a black neighborhood. The highway would have enabled white suburbanites to leapfrog the neighborhood on their way to jobs in downtown Boston. After consulting with community groups and people like Marvin, city and state officials approved a multimodal project. It would modernize mass transit, providing black inner-city residents with better access to the rest of Boston and the metro area. It would also improve long-distance and commuter rail facilities, create a useful local road, build new residential housing, and bring in a community college and a job training program.

There was just one problem. Federal transportation officials stonewalled. They had legal dibs on the land, which had been taken for a

federal highway. And they held the purse strings for the federal funds that would pay for the bulk of the replacement project.

The logjam was broken only when Marvin phoned an old friend, who had the authority to order the recalcitrant federal big-wigs to sign-off on the new project. Who was he, and why did he help Marvin?

New Activities

Still going strong as he approached his ninetieth birthday, Marvin remains active in his various businesses.

“Marvin is not only still active in business and public affairs; he’s also still the best dressed man when he enters any room,” said a longtime female friend who asked not to be named. “He has tremendous charisma. People think of him as a ladies’ man. The truth is that he is simply a very stylish gentleman, who lights up a room with his smile and spirit.”¹¹

Also, time and success have enabled him to devote more of himself to philanthropy. He supports a number of good causes, including hospitals and schools.

Brandeis University could not land Marvin as a butler back in the 1940s, but Marvin has returned to campus, having endowed a scholarship in his and his wife’s names in the Transitional Year Program, which helps prepare youths from disadvantaged backgrounds for college studies. At the University of Massachusetts’ Boston campus, Marvin is a member of the Board of Visitors, an advisory group to the Chancellor. At his alma mater, New England Conservatory, Marvin is a member of the Board of Overseers and he mentors individual students, who are all young musicians with outstanding promise.

And Marvin has received some belated honors for his Army service. In 2000, Marvin represented black World War II veterans at the Day of Honor 2000. The event’s ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery and the White House paid homage to veterans who were minorities – African-American, Native American, Japanese-American, Latino – whose service in World War II has often been overlooked and underplayed.

That same year Marvin was highlighted in an NBC News feature with Tom Brokaw, “Home of the Brave,” which paid tribute to black World War II servicemen.

Ten years later, in a ceremony at the Massachusetts State House, the nation of France awarded Marvin its Legion of Honor with highest

distinction for his service. Marvin became the first African-American in New England to receive the decoration. Prompted by France's recognition, in a better-late-than-never action the U.S. Army awarded Marvin several medals he had earned six and a half decades earlier but which the Army had never bestowed.

The momentum from those French and American honors continued. Marvin recently returned from France, where he participated in the June 2014 ceremonies marking the seventieth anniversary of the D-Day Normandy invasion. He shared a stage with President Barak Obama, the United Kingdom's Queen Elizabeth, and French President Francois Hollande. For two weeks he mingled with joyous Europeans, mainly French, who were not shy about expressing their gratitude to this elderly veteran who had helped liberate them and their parents and grandparents.

Marvin's success has enabled him to encourage his sons, David and Marque, to pursue careers in music, the career that eluded Marvin. They have achieved global distinction as modern jazz musicians. His daughter, Lisa, perhaps reflecting her medical-researcher mother's influence, is a consultant in federal asthma control projects.

Marvin is a fighter. Marvin is an entrepreneur. Real estate, music, night clubs, catering, the CDC...there's even a commuter airline and a limousine service on his resume. Marvin has been able to achieve things his forbearers never could have dreamed for themselves or their descendants. His story is unique. It spans centuries. It leaps from the chasm of slavery to the heights of self-determination. His uphill battle is the story of every person, of any color, creed, race, or religion, who wants to live freely, unfettered by the ignorance of others. Yet the heat of battle never distracts him from helping others.

Marvin's story is not just about his life. It is also about the development of civil rights in the United States in the 20th and 21st centuries. And Marvin was not merely a bystander, an African-American who lived through those events. He has been a participant and often enough a mover and shaker.

Marvin's story is not just for African-American readers. People of all colors and backgrounds can relate to Marvin's struggles to better himself and make a better life for his family. People of all colors and backgrounds can understand Marvin's fights against injustice. "Marvin is one of those

people who has helped make America better – for everyone,” said Michael Dukakis, former governor of Massachusetts and the 1988 Democratic nominee for President.¹²

Marvin has an entrepreneur’s x-ray vision. His fertile mind can see golden nuggets where most other people see only dusty slag. But as eagerly as he builds one enterprise after another, he is never too busy to answer an injustice. Whether a challenge is in business or civil rights, time and again Marvin has seen that the solution is to fight to assure everyone equal access to the promise of America, the chance to pursue your own dream.

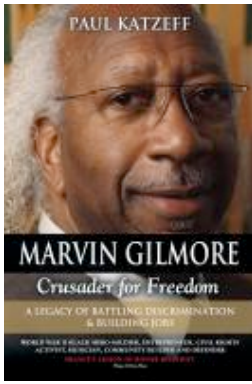
Part of what makes Marvin marvelous – as one magazine headline labeled him – is that seemingly infinite capacity for multitasking. Marvin builds his own businesses. At the same time he steers the CDC of Boston on a course designed to lure businesses to Boston’s black community and create jobs for the Hub’s have-nots. “People want jobs, not handouts,” Marvin said. “They want to earn money and feel independent.” Also at the same time, he crusades for civil rights.

“Marvin’s a force of nature. He’s led five or six lives, any one of which would be an interesting, honorable life,” said Andrew Szanton, a longtime friend of Marvin and memoirist of civil rights activist Charles Evers. “I asked him once how he did it. He said he barely sleeps. He also made clear to me he is always thinking. He is like a master problem solver. He is like one of those chess players who plays 50 people at once – and wins. He tackles a lot of problems all at once.”¹³

And so many of the problems involve helping other people. As a businessman, he takes time to reach out and help people. As head of the CDC, his entire focus is helping people. As an active citizen of Cambridge, he helps people. As a musical impresario he helped people. As a benefactor of universities and other worthy entities, he helps people. As a knight jousting for black civil rights, he certainly helps people.

He helps people even when others try to block him from contributing. Marvin the fighter.

Why does he care so fervently? It’s because Marvin, this grandson of slaves, knows exactly where he comes from.



This is the action-filled biography of Marvin E. Gilmore, Jr., an African-American musician-turned-businessman, the grandson of slaves, who rose from poverty to achieve the American dream. He's a decorated U.S. war hero who earned France's Legion of Honor and he has waged a life-long battle against racism and for jobs-creation. This book describes battles with armed segregationists, and making music with Hollywood stars. Gilmore has also played a key role in helping Boston outgrow its racial divisions.

Marvin Gilmore: Crusader for Freedom

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