



1917 photo of soldiers of the 369th Infantry Regiment holding the 15th New York National Guard Regiment flag. (NARA/Paul Thompson)

Here we tell the story of the all-black Infantry Regiment in WWI – the Harlem Hellfighters and Medal of Honor recipient Private Henry Johnson

June 1916: The 369th US Infantry Regiment

The "*Harlem Hellfighters*" was an all-black Infantry Regiment, the 369th US Infantry Regiment, founded in 1916. Many members of the 369th Infantry Regiment were from the Harlem neighborhood of New York. Harlem became famous as a center of African American culture during the 1920s – a period called the Harlem Renaissance.

The 369th was among the first American forces to arrive in Europe (December 27, 1917) during World War I. They spent more time in combat – 191 days - than any other American unit.²

Each Army unit has a distinctive unit insignia worn by soldiers of that unit. The 369th Infantry Regiment's distinctive unit insignia featured a silver rattlesnake.³

Founded: June 2, 1916

Motto: "Don't Tread On Me, God Damn, Let's Go"

Nickname(s): Hell-fighters, Men of Bronze, Black Rattlers

US Engagements: World War II, Meuse–Argonne offensive, Second Battle of the Marne

Branches: United States Army, French Army (attached during WWI)

The 369th's history began with the organization of the 15th Infantry Regiment of the New York National Guard. On June 2, 1913, a bill authorizing an African American National Guard regiment finally passed the New York state legislature, and Gov. William Sulzer signed it into law. However, the 15th New York existed in name only until June 1916, when Gov. Charles Whitman appointed William Hayward, his former campaign manager, to serve as its commanding officer. Hayward had been a colonel in the Nebraska National Guard, and he, like most of the field-grade officers in the unit, was white.

¹ The Photo: Abbott, S.C. 111-SC-11914. Photograph. May 4, 1918. National Archives. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/55183953>
Photograph. February 17, 1919. National Archives. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/533510>

² <https://www.military.com/history/harlem-hellfighters-full-story.html>

³ Illustration: 369th Support Battalion Distinctive Unit Insignia. Illustration. U.S. Army, The Institute of Heraldry. <https://tioh.army.mil/Catalog/HeraldryMulti.aspx?CategoryId=8274&grp=2&menu=Uniformed%20Services>

The soldiers were mostly New Yorkers, the first black troops in their state's National Guard. After years of lobbying by civic leaders from Harlem, Manhattan's celebrated black neighborhood, Governor Charles Whitman finally formed the all-black unit, first known as the 15th New York National Guard Regiment, in 1916, as the U.S. prepared for possible entry into World War I. Most of the men in the regiment were African American, although when the unit mobilized for war in 1917 approximately a dozen Puerto Ricans were drafted or enlisted into the regiment.

Hayward proved to be a skilled organizer. However, despite an endorsement from the *New York Age*, arguably the most influential African American newspaper of its era, the 15th New York had trouble meeting its recruiting targets. At full strength, the regiment would field several thousand men, but by the end of the summer of 1916, only a fraction of that number had enlisted.

The regiment's fortunes turned around with the enlistment of James Reese Europe in September 1916. Europe was a giant in the music scene of the early 20th century. He was the toast of American high society, had more than a dozen orchestras performing under his banner in 1916, and his creative energies were fueling the transformation of ragtime into jazz. Europe was a gifted multi-instrumentalist and composer as well as a tireless champion of African American music and musicians. Hayward recruited the African-American bandleader to form a first-rate marching band for parades, recruitment and fundraisers. Europe, a classically trained violinist and ragtime performer, enlisted as a lieutenant and convinced top Harlem musicians to join.

Recruitment, however, continued to be hampered by the 15th's limited resources. In an effort to boost his unit's profile, Hayward looked to the 8th Illinois, the only other African American regiment in the National Guard, for inspiration. The 8th Illinois had a concert band of national renown, and Hayward had Lieut. Jim Europe at the head of one of his [machine gun](#) companies.





The solution seemed obvious, but Europe had a reputation to uphold. If he was going to establish a regimental band, he told Hayward that he would need the freedom to make it the finest in the army. Hayward secured \$10,000 to fund the band, Europe was made bandleader, and Sissle was promoted to sergeant and made drum major. Europe spent months recruiting the country's finest musicians to his cause, and he personally led a trip to [Puerto Rico](#) to fill his [reed section](#). While Europe was building his band, the United States entered World War I.

The all-black regiment fought to “make the world safe for democracy” in a segregated Army under the command of mostly white officers. The 369th trained primarily at Camp Whitman in Poughkeepsie, New York, and in South Carolina. The unit bore the brunt of significant racism while in South Carolina: in

one famous case a hotel refused to sell a newspaper to two soldiers in the regiment, Lieutenant James Reese Europe and Sergeant Noble Sissle. Several white soldiers from the 27th Infantry Division came to the defense of their comrades from the 369th, averting trouble.

James Reese Europe and the 369th Infantry Regiment (Harlem Hellfighters) band, 1919. National Archives, Washington, D.C. (533506)

Having arrived in the port of Brest on December 27, 1917, they were sent to Saint-Nazaire, hundreds of miles from the front, and put to work on engineering projects that would pave the way for the larger body of U.S. troops to come. After a month went by with no new orders, Hayward recognized the very real possibility that his men would be trading their rifles for shovels for the duration of the war. With the regimental band spreading “ragtimitis” throughout France, Hayward used their fame in his appeal to American Expeditionary Force commander Gen. John J. Pershing for reassignment to combat duty.

In April of 1918, General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in Europe “loaned” the 369th to the 161st Division of the French Army. This transfer assisted with smoothing out two issues facing the U.S. Command:

- The British and French were demanding American reinforcements for their badly depleted divisions after more than three years of fighting
- Vocal U.S. white officers refused to brigade the regiment with white soldiers.⁴

March-April 1917: The 369th attached to the French Army⁵

In March 1918 the unit was re-designated the 369th Infantry Regiment, and the following month it was attached to the 16th Division of the Fourth French Army under Gen. Henri Gouraud. The French had fully [integrated](#) African colonial troops into their army for decades, so the men of the 369th found greater

⁴ <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Education>; <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/5334>

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acceptance in a foreign army than they had in their own. Despite the expectation that this arrangement would be temporary, members of the 369th never served under American command during the war.



⁶ Pershing's attitudes toward black troops were [complicated](#); he served with the all-black 10th Cavalry in 1895, [from whence he got his nickname "Black Jack,"](#) but wrote in his 1931 memoir that black soldiers needed more training because of "lower capacity and lack of education.") Colonel Hayward, who had lobbied Pershing to let his troops fight, captured the ironies of the general's decision in a letter. "A fairy tale has materialized," wrote Hayward. "We are now a combat unit.... Our great American general simply put the black orphan in a basket, set it on the doorstep of the French, pulled the bell, and went away."

To their credit, the French paid little attention to Pershing's warnings. They sent the 369th to the western edge of the Argonne Forest, in the Champagne region of France⁷ and the 369th Infantry was soon training at Givry-en-Argonne.

These African-American soldiers wore American uniforms, some dating from the time of the Union Army. Seeing the shoddy equipment given to America's black troops, the French re-kitted the Hellfighters with French rifles, helmets, belts, gas masks and canteens (with wine).

They also beefed up the 369th's military training: in trench construction, machine-gun operation, the construction and use of grenades, and preparations for a gas attack. "They proved apt pupils," wrote journalist and educator Emmett J. Scott in *Scott's Official History of The American Negro in the World War*, the first major chronicle of African-American contributions to WWI, published in 1919. "In grenade-throwing they easily outdid their instructors, and in bayonet work they demonstrated great skill."⁸

By summer they were fighting in the Champagne-Marne Defensive and the Aisne-Marne Offensive⁹ in the Champagne region, on the western edge of the Argonne Forest and into the active trenches. From April 1918 the 369th would spend 191 days in combat, a longer span than any other U.S. unit.

The 369th served with distinction under French command with French colonial units in front-line combat in the Champagne-Marne Defensive in July of 1918, the Second Battle of the Marne during the Aisne Marne Offensive in July and August of 1918, and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive from September to November of 1918.

⁶ **Harlem Hellfighters:** *Soldiers of the 369th Infantry Regiment (Harlem Hellfighters) in French uniforms, 1918.* Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

⁷ Jennifer D. Keene, "Americans as Warriors: 'Doughboys' in Battle during the First World War", *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 17, No. 1, World War I (Oct., 2002), p. 17.

⁸ <https://www.history.com/news/harlem-hellfighters-horace-pippin-tales-from-wwi-trenches>

⁹ <https://www.abmc.gov/news-events/news/harlem-hellfighters-most-storied-african-american-combat-unit-world-war-i> (American Battle Monuments Commission)

July 1918. The 369th suffered murderous shelling from the Germans at the [Second Battle of the Marne](#), but their line held. As the Allies prepared for a counterattack, the 369th was reassigned to the French 161st Division, and it was with this unit that they would participate in the [Meuse-Argonne offensive](#).

On September 29, 1918, the 369th captured the town of Séchault, France, but suffered some of the heaviest losses of any American regiment in the process.

The unit saw grisly combat during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, which began on September 26, 1918, more than a million American and French troops attacked the German lines. On that first day the 369th captured the town of Ripont, and pushed forward one kilometer the following day. Despite stubborn resistance at the end of the month, the 369th advanced to a critical position near Séchault on September 30, capturing a key railroad junction.

.As part of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the 369th suffered some of the worst casualties suffered by an American regiment in the war. The French nicknamed them the “Men of Bronze.” The Germans, bearing the brunt of their ferocity, named them “Hellfighters.”

On October 6, 1918, the French 161st Division was relieved and the badly mauled Hellfighters were withdrawn to the rear. For its performance at Séchault, the entire regiment was awarded the Croix de Guerre for valor. One member of the 369th, Sergeant Henry Johnson, was awarded the French Croix de guerre¹⁰ and posthumously the Medal of Honor. ¹¹



Harlem Hellfighters
Members of the 369th Infantry Regiment (Harlem Hellfighters) posing with their awards for gallantry in combat.
National Archives, Washington, D.C. (533492)

After several days of rest, the 369th returned to the lines in the Vosges Mountains as the Allied advance continued. In a matter of days, these advances cost the regiment 851 men, and shortly after they were relieved from the front lines. Sporadic fighting continued to take a toll on the unit, but news of an armistice spread quickly among the men.

After November 11, the 369th transitioned to occupation duty, and Hayward would personally lead the first American unit to reach the [Rhine](#).

May 1917: Medal of Honor recipient - Private Henry Johnson – Henry Johnson was a Private in Company C, 369th US Infantry Regiment, 93rd Infantry Division, American Expeditionary Forces.

¹⁰ Henry Johnson in 1919, wearing his [Croix de Guerre](#). Note, too, the two wound chevrons on his lower right sleeve

¹¹ American Battle Monuments Commission-Tuesday February 10, 2015. <https://www.abmc.gov/news-events/news/harlem-hellfighters-most-storied-african-american-combat-unit-world-war-i>



One evening in May 1917 Private Johnson showed great courage above and beyond the call of duty. He demonstrated extraordinary heroism and selflessness at the risk of his own life to save another.

The French Army assigned Henry Johnson and Needham Robert's regiment to Outpost 20 on the edge of the Argonne Forest in the Champagne region of France and equipped them with French rifles and helmets.

While on observation post duty on the night of ***May 14, 1918***, the greatly outnumbered duo fended off a German patrol which may have numbered as many as 36 soldiers. Johnson began throwing grenades at the approaching Germans; hit by a German grenade, Roberts could only pass more of the small bombs to Johnson to lob at the enemy.

In addition to the grenades, Johnson used the butt of his rifle, a bolo knife, and his bare fists, Johnson repelled the Germans: When he exhausted his supply of grenades, Johnson began firing his rifle, but it soon jammed when he tried to insert another cartridge. By then the Germans had surrounded the two privates, and Johnson used his rifle as a club until the butt splintered. He saw the Germans attempting to take Roberts prisoner, and charged at them with his only remaining weapon, a bolo knife.

Johnson stabbed one soldier in the stomach and another in the ribs, and was still fighting when more French and American troops arrived on the scene, causing the Germans to retreat. When the reinforcements got there, Johnson fainted from the 21 wounds he had sustained in the one-hour battle.

All told, he had killed four Germans and wounded some 10 to 20 more, and prevented them from breaking the French line. Even when wounded and out of ammunition, he fought on and survived to become the first American, black or white, to receive the French *Croix de Guerre avec Palme* for bravery.

American reporters' accounts of their heroics reached home within days. "Two New York Negro Soldiers Foil German Assault," declared the *New York World's* lead headline on May 20, 1918. "Pershing Praises Brave Negroes," read a *New York Sun* headline the next day. Such stories made Johnson and Roberts two of the best-known American soldiers in World War I, at a time when most U.S. troops either hadn't yet arrived in France or were training away from the front lines.

After the armistice, the federal government used Johnson's likeness to advertise war bonds and recruit minorities but did not recognize his bravery until June 25, 1996, when he was posthumously awarded a Purple Heart.¹²

Returning home, now Sergeant Johnson participated (with his regiment) in a victory parade on [Fifth Avenue](#) in [New York City](#) in February 1919.^[11]

¹² <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/henry-johnson.htm>

Though former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt called Johnson one of the “five bravest Americans” to serve in World War I, and the government used his name and image on Victory War stamps and army recruiting materials, Johnson’s discharge papers made no mention of his many wounds, and he received no disability pay after the war.

Johnson himself became a champion for his fellow troops, testifying before the New York legislature in early 1919 in support of a bill to give veterans a preference in government hiring. But he soon tired of public speaking. “Henry Johnson was expected... to grin, laugh, show good cheer, and talk about what he’d done that night in May as if it had afforded him the thrill of a lifetime,” wrote Nelson. “He’d become, to his own race, a symbol of black manhood, but to whites, he was expected to be a voice for racial harmony.”



Instead, after a fiery speech in St. Louis in March 1919, in which he accused white soldiers of racism and cowardice, Johnson disappeared from the public sphere.

Johnson returned to Albany, and to his job as a railroad porter, but his injuries made it difficult for him to work, and he soon began to decline into alcoholism and poverty. He spent part of 1920 in the Army’s Walter Reed hospital and later grew sick from tuberculosis. His wife and children left him, and he died penniless in July 1929, at age 39, of an enlarged heart at the age of 32.

As far as anyone in his family knew, he ended up in a pauper’s grave in Albany.

The 369th returned to a huge, victory parade in New York in February 1919. People crowded the streets, welcoming home these brave soldiers. But despite this celebration, little to nothing had changed in their day-to-day lives. And it would take another world war, and decades of civil rights activism before the hopes of these African-American doughboys would be realized. In fact, the inequalities experienced by these brave men are still being remedied today.



Legislation passed Congress in December 2014 to pave the way for Sgt. Henry Johnson, who served with the 369th, to receive the Medal of Honor for his actions during World War I¹³. While there was no official policy of discrimination regarding the Medal of Honor, during World War I prejudice in the Armed Services prevented African-Americans such as Johnson from receiving the honor.

A posthumous Medal of Honor followed for Johnson in 2015.

¹³ Ray, Michael. "Harlem Hellfighters". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 18 Apr. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Harlem-Hellfighters>. Accessed 29 January 2021.