

## **The Harlem Hellfighters - Forgotten Heroes of World War I**

When it comes to the history of the First World War, most American students are taught a great deal about the complex web of European alliances that sparked the conflict and the postwar negotiations that created the Treaty of Versailles, but not much about what happened in between. Some mention is made of a few notable combatants, like Sergeant Alvin York or Major Charles Whittlesey and his “Lost Battalion.” Other individuals, like Harry Truman or Douglas MacArthur, are mentioned because of the roles they would later play in World War Two. But little is remembered about one of the most successful units in the entire American Expeditionary Force, the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.

In 191 days under enemy fire, the 369<sup>th</sup> never lost a prisoner or gave up a foot of captured ground. They achieved all but one of the military objectives they were given. The regiment as a whole was awarded the French military honor, the Croix de Guerre, and 171 of the officers and troops received individual citations for bravery, more than any other American unit in the war. And if that wasn’t enough, the 369<sup>th</sup> also helped introduce Jazz to the people of Europe. Ironically, though, all this was accomplished by troops that many Americans hadn’t even wanted to send into combat in the first place.

The 369<sup>th</sup> was a “colored regiment,” composed entirely of African-American soldiers. African-Americans had been serving in the U.S. Army since the Civil War, but they had always been kept apart from white soldiers - other than their white commanding officers - and were almost always poorly equipped compared to the white regiments. Despite these policies, however, the army still offered one of the few opportunities for success that many African-American men had, and so they were

willing to endure the harsh conditions demanded of them. When the United States declared war on Germany in 1917, African-Americans were just as eager to join the fight as their white countrymen were.

The 369<sup>th</sup> Regiment had already been formed by the time the U.S. entered the war. It had been founded in 1916 as the 15<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the New York National Guard. Charles W. Fillmore, an African-American veteran of the Spanish-American War, was the unit's initial sponsor, and he received a commission to serve in the unit as a Captain. New York Governor Charles Whitman named William Hayward, a white public service commissioner who had previously been a Colonel in the Nebraska National Guard, as the unit's commanding officer.

Hayward was already known and liked in New York's African-American community, and he wanted the regiment to become a source of community pride, especially in the rapidly growing Harlem district. By the time the U.S. entered the war, the 15<sup>th</sup> was already at its peacetime strength of 1378 troops. Among the recruits was James Reese Europe, a musician who had gained national fame through his collaboration with the popular dancers Vernon and Irene Castle. Europe had staged the first performance by African-American musicians at Carnegie Hall, had been the first African-American bandleader to receive a major recording contract, and was president of New York's first effective professional organization for African-American musicians, the Clef Club. Originally, Colonel Hayward had simply wanted Europe to form a regimental band, but Europe went a step farther, passing the Lieutenant's examination and earning a commission. By the time the 15<sup>th</sup> New York arrived in France and became the 369<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the AEF, Lieutenant Europe was planning to leave the

regimental band in the hands of his bandmaster, Eugene Mikell, and his friend and collaborator, Noble Sissle. He would be commanding a machine gun unit instead.

When the men of the 369<sup>th</sup> first arrived in France, however, it looked like none of them would be given a chance to fight. The War Department's segregation policy prevented colored regiments from being placed in the same military division as white regiments, and there weren't enough colored regiments to form a division of their own. Colored regiments were put to work as laborers and stevedores instead, usually being given the most menial tasks available. Many Americans back home wanted to keep them there. Several incidents of racially motivated violence had broken out in training camps across the southern U.S., usually when African-American soldiers from the north balked at southern "Jim Crow" segregation laws. Many people saw the violence as a warning sign, and feared an uprising after the war if African-Americans were given combat training and experience.

But while the U.S. was reluctant to put African-Americans into battle, France was not. Badly in need of fresh troops after years of brutal trench warfare, the French persuaded American General John J. Pershing to reassign the 369<sup>th</sup> and three other colored regiments to their Fourth Army. The men of the 369<sup>th</sup> and their new commanders took to each other immediately. The French officers held none of the prejudices that African-Americans faced in the U.S. Army. Some of them had previously commanded and fought alongside African troops in the French colonies. In an environment free of bigotry, the Americans quickly learned the use of French weaponry, French battle tactics and in many cases even the French language. By April 1918, the 369<sup>th</sup> was ready to take its place in the French lines.

It didn't take long for the regiment to start building a reputation for courage under fire. Just one month later, two privates, Needham Roberts and Henry Johnson, fought a battle that would become one of the biggest American stories of the war. A German patrol of at least two dozen men attacked their small outpost, quickly wounding the soldiers with grenades and pinning down the rest of their combat group in a dugout. Roberts and Johnson fought back on their own, even to the point of attacking the enemy with knives and swinging their rifles like clubs after their ammunition ran out. The Germans finally withdrew with at least four dead and several others wounded. Roberts and Johnson were near death themselves, but managed to survive until a relief party reached them. In a fortunate coincidence, at that same time three American journalists were visiting the 369<sup>th</sup> to report on the regimental band. They were promptly given an account of the battle and taken to see the outpost for themselves. Within days the Associated Press was spreading word of the battle throughout the United States. Roberts and Johnson became national heroes, especially in the African-American community. They were the first Americans to earn the French Croix de Guerre during the war.

That was only the beginning. As the war entered its closing months, the men of the 369<sup>th</sup> executed a string of daring battlefield exploits. At the battle of Belleau Wood, Colonel Hayward shrugged off French soldiers advising him to retreat and led his troops through a German artillery barrage, declaring, "My men never retire. They go forward, or they die!" Captain Fillmore, the man who initially sponsored the regiment in New York, received the Croix de Guerre for conspicuous bravery in an offensive against the German stronghold of Butte de Mesnil. A sergeant named William Butler earned the

Distinguished Service Cross for attacking a German raiding party single-handed, freeing six fellow Americans who had been taken prisoner. The Germans began referring to the men of the 369<sup>th</sup> as *Blutlustige Schwartzmanner* - "bloodthirsty black men." The French gave the regiment the nickname it would take into history - the Hellfighters.

Meanwhile, as the 369<sup>th</sup> was fighting on the front lines, the regimental band was making a name for itself as well. James Reese Europe, the first African-American officer to lead troops into battle during the war, had been wounded during a poison gas attack in mid-June. He recovered easily, even writing one of his most popular songs while sitting in a field hospital bed, but history isn't clear on the question of whether he ever returned to the battlefield. By mid-August, though, he had returned to his role of leading the band. Eugene Mikell and Noble Sissle had led the band successfully while Europe was at the front, but with Europe back in charge the band's popularity took off. The band was sent to give a single concert in Paris, but they were so well received that their assignment was extended by an additional two months, which they spent touring the camps and hospitals around the city and performing for Allied soldiers and French citizens alike. The crowds cheered for the Hellfighters more than any other band performing during the war, even more than such famous groups as the British Grenadiers' Band and the Royal Italian Band. Their popularity stemmed not from *what* they played, but rather from *how* they played. Their performances were infused with a style that people were only just beginning to call Jazz.

When the war finally ended, the now-famous and highly decorated 369<sup>th</sup> Hellfighters were given the honor of serving as the Allied Forces' advance guard, the first unit to march through the German lines and reach the Rhine River. Meanwhile, the

Hellfighters Band had signed a contract with the Pathé Record Company and was making plans for a tour across the United States. Regiment and band alike were welcomed back to New York City with a grand parade viewed by almost one million people. It looked very much like a bright and successful future lay ahead.

But then tragedy struck. Only a few weeks later, in Boston on the final leg of the band's first tour, James Reese Europe was killed. His throat had been slashed by a disgruntled member of his own band. Eugene Mikell tried to take his place as bandleader, but without Europe the public's interest faded. Soon postwar disillusionment and isolationism set in, diverting most of the country's attention away from the war and its heroes.

Noble Sissle went on to team with another of James Reese Europe's old friends and collaborators, Eubie Blake. The two of them performed in vaudeville as the "Dixie Duo," singing many of Europe's songs in their act. They were also successful in American musical theater, beginning in 1921 with their groundbreaking production, *Shuffle Along*. Meanwhile, another former Hellfighter, Horace Pippin, overcame battlefield injuries that had left him with a partially paralyzed right arm and became a noteworthy painter in the 1930s and 40s.

The remaining men of the 369<sup>th</sup> went back to their daily lives, and the regiment disappeared into the pages of history. But even though the memory of the Hellfighters themselves has faded, their contribution to the United States remains. Together with previous African-American regiments like the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts volunteers of the Civil War and the "Buffalo Soldiers" of the American frontier, they stand as shining examples

of Americans willing to risk their lives and perform great deeds of heroism, even when the country they served wasn't willing to give them equal recognition in return.

**Sources used for this article included:**

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