

Who Were the Harlem Hellfighters?

Henry Louis Gates Jr., 11/11/13

*Henry Louis Gates Jr. is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and founding director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University. He is also the editor-in-chief of **The Root**. Follow him on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).*

Introduction

“Up the wide avenue they swung. Their smiles outshone the golden sunlight. In every line proud chests expanded beneath the medals valor had won. The impassioned cheering of the crowds massed along the way drowned the blaring cadence of their former jazz band. The old 15th was on parade and New York turned out to tender its dark-skinned heroes a New York welcome.”

So began the three-page spread the New York Tribune ran Feb. 18, 1919, a day after 3,000 veterans of the 369th Infantry (formerly the 15th New York (Colored) Regiment) paraded up from Fifth Avenue at 23rd Street to 145th and Lenox. One of the few black combat regiments in World War I, they’d earned the prestigious Croix de Guerre from the French army under which they’d served for six months of “brave and bitter fighting.” Their nickname they’d received from their German foes: “Hellfighters,” the *Harlem* Hellfighters.

In their ranks was one of the Great War’s greatest heroes, Pvt. Henry Johnson of Albany, N.Y., who, though riding in a car for the wounded, was so moved by the outpouring he stood up waving the bouquet of flowers he’d been handed. It would take another 77 years for Johnson to receive an official Purple Heart

from his own government, but on this day, not even the steel plate in his foot could weigh him down.



It was, the newspapers noted, the first opportunity the City of New York had to greet a full regiment of returning doughboys, black or white. The Chicago Defender put the crowd at 2 million, the New York Tribune at 5 million, with even the New York Times conservatively estimating it at “hundreds of thousands.” “Never have white Americans accorded so heartfelt and hearty a reception to a contingent of their black country-men,” the *Tribune* continued. And “the ebony warriors” felt it, literally, beneath a hail of chocolate candy, cigarettes and coins raining down on them from open windows up and down the avenues. It would have been hard to miss them, at least according to the New York Times, to whom all the men appeared 7 feet tall.

Yet as rousing as those well-wishers were, the Tribune pointed out, “the greeting the regiment received along Fifth Avenue was to the tumult which greeted it in Harlem as the west wind to a tornado.” After all, 70 percent of the 369th called Harlem home, and their families, friends and neighbors had turned out in full force to thank and welcome those who’d made it back. Eight hundred hadn’t, an absence recalled in the number of handkerchiefs drying wet eyes...

Blacks Debate the War Effort

Two years before, on April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war in order to enter a conflict between European powers that had started over the assassination of an archduke in 1914. “The World must be made safe for democracy,” the president said. The nation’s allies: the British, French and Russians. Its enemies: Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary, the so-called Central Powers.

For some African Americans, Wilson’s rhetoric smacked of hypocrisy. After all, he was the president who had screened *Birth of a Nation* (a film glorifying the Ku Klux Klan) at the White House and refused to support a federal anti-lynching bill, even though each year averaged more than one lynching a week, predominantly in former Confederate states that had effectively stripped black men of their voting rights. “Will someone tell us just how long Mr. Wilson has been a convert to TRUE DEMOCRACY?” the Baltimore Afro-American editorialized on April 28, 1917 (quoted in Williams). “Patriotism has no appeal for us; justice has,” the Messenger, a Socialist publication launched by editors Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph (of March on Washington fame), declared on Nov. 1, 1917—a sentiment that would land both men in jail under the Espionage Act in 1918 (quoted in Adriane Lentz-Smith’s 2009 book, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I*).

Many more blacks viewed the war as an opportunity for victory at home and abroad. W.E.B. Du Bois, a founder of the NAACP in 1909, urged his fellow African Americans to “Close Ranks” in a (now infamous) piece he wrote for the Crisis in July 1918, despite the persistent segregation of black officers at

training camp. “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy,” Du Bois advised—a stance, Williams notes, that would stir controversy when Du Bois was exposed for making simultaneous “efforts to secure a captaincy” for himself.

In all, Williams writes, “2.3 million blacks registered [for the draft]” during World War I. Although the Marines would not accept them, and the Navy enlisted few and only in menial positions, large numbers served in the army. Some 375,000 blacks served overall, including “639 men [who] received commissions, a historical first,” Williams adds in his essay “African Americans and World War I.”

Wartime Violence

The U.S. Army segregated its black troops into two combat divisions, the 92nd and the 93rd, because, as Williams explains, “War planners deemed racial segregation, just as in civilian life, the most logical and efficient way of managing the presence of African Americans in the army.”

But a different kind of violence soon spread—at home, most notably in East St. Louis, where, on July 2, 1917, the rumor that a black man had killed a white man resulted in the murder of nine whites and hundreds of blacks, not to mention half a million dollars in property damage. Things weren’t much better in the South. On August 23, 1917, black soldiers in the 24th Infantry garrisoned in Houston revolted when one of their comrades was beaten and arrested by two white police officers after he tried to stop them from arresting a black woman. Quickly, rumors flew that a white mob

was approaching the camp, which, whether true or not, prompted the black troops to scour the camp for ammunition under the notion that the best defense is a good offense...

Harlem Hellfighters: Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts

... Of the 375,000 blacks who served in World War I, 200,000 shipped out overseas, but even in the theater of war, few saw combat. Most suffered through backbreaking labor in noncombat service units as part of the Services of Supply. Lentz-Smith puts the number of combat troops at 42,000, only 11 percent of all blacks in the army.

Gen. John J. Pershing, the commander of American Expeditionary Forces in Europe, assigned the 93rd Combat Division to the French Army. The 93rd consisted of the 369th, 370th, 371st and 372nd infantry regiments. “With the French, the Harlem Hellfighters fought at Chateau-Thierry and Belleau Wood,” a resource for teachers states on the [National Archives website](#). “All told they spent 191 days in combat, longer than any other American unit in the war.” They gave no ground to the enemy, and none of their men were captured—although, as we shall see, at least one came close.

The story lives in legend: “The first two Americans to be decorated by France in the first World War were Henry Johnson, and Needham Roberts, both Negroes. Johnson killed four Germans and wounded twenty-eight others single-handedly.” Turns out this Amazing Fact is a fact indeed (though the number of Germans wounded was lower).

Henry Lincoln Johnson was born in Alexandria, Va., in 1897, writes Tiffani Murray in her entry on Johnson in the African American National

Biography Online. As a teenager, he moved to the North, eventually settling down with a job as a porter in Albany, N.Y. Johnson enlisted in the army on June 5, 1917. Needham Roberts hailed from Trenton, N.J. His father was a preacher and janitor. Roberts took odd jobs as a teenager, and first attempted to enlist in the Navy in 1916 but was turned down for being too young.

Both men landed in France with their regiment in early 1918. Their date with history came on the night of May 13-14. Roberts and Johnson were two men on a five-man observation team looking for signs of German advances.

According to Christopher Capozzola, writing on Roberts in the African American National Biography Online, the “remote listening post [was] sixty yards into the no-man’s-land between the French and German forces that faced off along the banks of the Aisne River.”

In a dramatic letter to Johnson’s wife, the 369th’s white colonel, William Hayward, provided the details:

“At the beginning of the attack the Germans fired a volley of bullets and grenades and both of the boys were wounded, your husband three times and Roberts twice, then the Germans rushed the post, expecting to make an easy capture. In spite of their wounds, the two boys waited coolly and courageously and when the Germans were within striking distance opened fire, your husband with his rifle and Private Roberts from his helpless position on the ground with hand grenades. But the German raiding party came on in spite of their wounded and in a few seconds our boys were at grips with the terrible foe in a desperate hand to hand

encounter in which the enemy outnumbered them ten to one.

“The boys inflicted great loss on the enemy, but Roberts was overpowered and about to be carried away when your husband, who had used up all of the cartridges in the magazine of his rifle and had knocked one German down with the butt end of it, drew his bolo from his belt. A bolo is a short heavy weapon carried by the American soldier, with the edge of a razor, the weight of a cleaver and the point of a butcher knife. He rushed to the rescue of his former comrade, and fighting desperately, opened with his bolo the head of the German who was throttling Roberts and turned to the *boche* who had Roberts by the feet, plunging the bolo into the German’s bowels ...

“Henry laid about him right and left with his heavy knife, and Roberts released from the grasp of the scoundrels, began again to throw hand grenades and exploded them in their midst, and the Germans, doubtless thinking it was a host instead of two brave Colored boys fighting like tigers at bay, picked up their dead and wounded and slunk away, leaving many weapons and part of their shot riddled clothing, and leaving a trail of blood, which we followed at dawn near to their lines ... So it was in this way the Germans found the Black Americans. Both boys have received a citation of the French general commanding the splendid French division in which my regiment is now serving and will receive the *croix de*

guerre cross of war.” —*The Chicago Defender*, June 22, 1918

At the top of the American chain of command, Gen. Pershing remarked on Johnson’s and Roberts’ heroics in his communiqué of May 20, 1918: “Reports in hand show a notable instance of bravery and devotion shown by two soldiers of an American colored regiment operating in a French sector ... They should be given credit for preventing, by their bravery, the capture of any of our men.”

With his letter to Mrs. Johnson, Col. Hayward sent the equivalent of 50 francs, half of what the French general overseeing the 369th, Henri Gouraud, had earmarked for “the family of the first one of my soldiers wounded in a fight with the enemy under heroic circumstances.” The other half, Hayward told her, would go to Robert’s family. As valuable as that money was, perhaps the following sentiment he shared brought as much comfort: “I regret to say that he [Johnson] is in the hospital, seriously, but not dangerously wounded, the wounds having been received under such circumstances that every one of us in the regiment would be pleased and proud to trade places with him.” It was a far cry from what the black men of the 92nd Division had experienced and a level of sympathy and respect that stands out when we recall that Col. Hayward and Pvt. Johnson wouldn’t have been able to ride the same railroad car in the Jim Crow South.

Williams writes, “In Henry Johnson, African Americans had found their modern-day Crispus Attucks.” Summarizing his war record at the Harlem Veterans Day parade, Pvt. George Jackson riffed on the official report, joshing that Johnson had “killed [one German] with rifle shots,” one “with butt of rifle” and another he’d “scared to death,” while of those

injured, two he'd simply “kicked and cussed out” (New York Tribune, Feb. 18, 1919). For their courage, the New York Times reported the day after the parade, “the [German] *boches* gave them the title of the ‘Blutdurstig schwarze manner,’ ” or “Blood thirsty black men,” which eventually translated to “Hellfighters.”

Receiving Awards and Returning Home

The French conveyed a number of military decorations on black American soldiers in World War I, with Roberts and Johnson the first Americans of any race to receive the coveted Croix de Guerre. By war's end, members of the 369th, 371st and 372nd regiments also received it.

As mentioned at the top, many black veterans received a hero's welcome when they returned to the United States, at least from their own communities. Leading the Harlem Hellfighters in the New York City parade was Lt. James “Jim” Reese Europe's jazz band, which had crisscrossed Europe some 100,000 miles and drove Paris “jazz-mad,” the New York Times and Tribune reported. Even though no black regiment had been kept around long enough (perhaps not coincidentally) to participate in the first Armistice Day celebration in France on Nov. 11, 1918, Williams notes, in New York, the Tribune observed, “Racial lines were for the time displaced. The color of their [the 369th's] skin had nothing to do with the occasion. The blood they had shed in France was as red as any other.”

Perhaps best summing up what the war had achieved for them personally, one black Hellfighter, spotting his old boss, Henry C. Frick (of steel and museum fame), along the

parade route, exclaimed, “That's one of the biggest men in New York. I used to shine his shoes. Now he's almost falling out of a window to wave to me.”

“No American soldiers saw harder or more combat fighting than they, and none gave a better accounting of themselves,” district leader John Lyons read to the paraders from a memorial written by Columbia University President Nicholas Murray Butler. “We welcome them to the work of peace as we honor them for the work of war” (New York Tribune, Feb. 18, 1919).

The Sad Postscripts of Roberts and Johnson



Neither Henry Johnson nor Needham Roberts maintained their fame for long. Johnson, despite being trumpeted in advertisements by

the military, was denied a disability claim, because his discharge papers did not properly record his injuries. He died in 1929 at the age of 32 and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery—a fact lost to history until his grave was rediscovered in 2002. Johnson received a posthumous Purple Heart in 1996 and a Distinguished Service Cross in 2003. He also has a statue and a street named in his honor in Albany.

In 1924, Roberts was arrested for wearing his uniform after he had been discharged, Capozzola writes. In 1928, he was arrested for a sex crime. He ran afoul of the law again in the late 1940s, when he was accused of molesting an 8-year-old girl. Roberts and his second wife hanged themselves on April 18, 1949.

We Return Fighting

Despite the pomp and circumstance of those first Veterans Day parades, the summer of 1919 would earn the nickname “Red Summer” from James Weldon Johnson, owing to the high number of race riots occurring across America’s cities, most notably Chicago, the site of one of those parades. A number of the victims were black veterans. “Every time a white man insults a negro, every time he conveys by his conduct and overweening sense of his race superiority to a negro, he contributes to the cause out of which these race riots have come,” former president William Howard Taft wrote in an op-ed in the *Washington Post* on Aug. 4, 1919. Yet “[n]o race responds so quickly to sympathetic aid as the negro,” Taft added in his paternalistic way.

But the war had already changed many of the nation’s black veterans, and Du Bois summed it up best in a piece he wrote for the *Crisis* in May 1919 titled “Returning Soldiers.” “It was right

for us to fight. The faults of our country are our faults. Under similar circumstances, we would fight again. But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land. *We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting.* Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.”

No black veterans of the Great War survive today, but may we keep them—and the more than 2 million living black veterans—in our thoughts today.

Post Reading Questions:

Respond in complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What was Woodrow Wilson’s rationale for going to war? Why does Gates (the author) call him a hypocrite?
2. Explain the debate many African Americans had over serving in World War I.
3. How were black soldiers treated by the Army? Give 3 examples.
4. Who was Henry Johnson? Why was he famous?
5. How were Johnson and Roberts treated when they returned home from war?