

HISTORY STORIES

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WWI Hero Henry Johnson Finally Receives Medal of Honor

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In 1917, Henry Johnson was working as a railroad porter in Albany, New York, when the United States declared war on Germany. At the time, before the Selective Service Act introduced conscription, African-American volunteers were only allowed in four all-black regiments in the Army and a few National Guard units. Johnson enlisted in the 15th New York National Guard Regiment, which was converted into the 369th Infantry Regiment for the purposes of the war. The regiment belonged to the largely black 93rd Division of the American Expeditionary Force, a hastily assembled division that would be among the first American forces to arrive in France. Most of the 369th's soldiers came from Harlem, San Juan Hill (around 59th Street in Manhattan) and Williamsburg, Brooklyn; after their exploits in France, they would be dubbed the "Harlem Hellfighters."

In the early months of 1918, with France stretched to its limits in its struggle against Germany, U.S. General John Pershing lent the 369th to the Fourth Army, though he made it clear he considered black soldiers inferior to whites. In fact, Pershing went even further in his directive to the French Military Mission, writing that the black man lacked a "civic and professional conscience" and was a "constant menace to the American." 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 France.

Outfitted in French military garb, Johnson and another private, Needham Roberts of New Jersey, were serving sentry duty on the night of May 4, 1918, when German snipers began firing on them. 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. 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. The French awarded both Johnson and Roberts the Croix de Guerre; Johnson's included the coveted Gold Palm for extraordinary valor. In all, some 500 members of the Harlem Hellfighters earned the Croix de Guerre during World War I, showing France's appreciation for their sacrifice.

When Johnson and his fellow Hellfighters arrived home in February 1919, they were honored with a parade up New York's Fifth Avenue. Thousands of spectators lined the route to watch Johnson lead nearly 3,000 troops in an open car towards Harlem, holding a bouquet of lilies. The celebration had a dark side, however: The 369th were given their own parade because they weren't allowed to join the official victory parade alongside other returning U.S. troops.

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 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 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. His wife and children left him, and he died penniless in 1929 at the age of 32. As far as anyone in his family knew, he ended up in a pauper’s grave in Albany.

Starting in the 1990s, however, Johnson’s story began gaining more recognition. Albany erected a monument in his honor, and a campaign was launched to get the United States government to posthumously recognize Johnson for his service. Spearheaded by Johnson’s son Herman—who was one of the famed Tuskegee Airmen during World War II—and New York politicians including Senator Chuck Schumer, the efforts gained ground over the years, and in 1996 President Bill Clinton awarded Johnson a Purple Heart. In 2001, historians from the New York Division of Military and Naval Affairs confirmed that Johnson had in fact received a burial with military honors at Arlington National Cemetery in July 1929, unbeknownst to his family. In 2002, the U.S. Army awarded Johnson the nation’s second-highest military honor, the Distinguished Service Cross.

Still, Schumer and other Johnson supporters continued their dedicated campaign to win Johnson the recognition they felt he deserved, and had been denied solely because of the color of his skin. After nearly two decades, their efforts were finally rewarded last month when the White House announced that Johnson would receive the Medal of Honor on June 2. Among the new information that convinced the U.S. Army to bestow its highest award was a communiqué from Pershing, written shortly after the Argonne battle, commending Johnson’s performance. As reported by NBC News, one of Senator Schumer’s staffers turned up the previously unknown document in her research, along with firsthand accounts of the battle from Roberts and other soldiers. Herman Johnson passed away in 2004, and Command Sergeant Major Louis Wilson of the New York National Guard accepted the Medal of Honor on behalf of Henry Johnson.

William Shemin, a fellow World War I veteran, was also awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor in the White House ceremony; his daughters, Ina Bass and Elsie Shemin-Roth, accepted on his behalf. As a member of the 47th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, in August 1918, Shemin took control of his platoon after its officers were injured or killed, until he was struck by a German machine gun bullet that pierced his helmet. Shemin, who was Jewish, received the Purple Heart for his combat injuries and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross in December 1919, but—like Johnson—was denied the nation’s highest honor, likely due to the rampant discrimination of the era.

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