

# **369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment**

## **The Harlem Hellfighters**

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Like many of you I am an avid listener of National Public Radio and I'm sure that those of you who listen to WKMS or WPLN have had your driveway moments. That is exactly what happened to me last June. I completed my drive way moment and filed the topic away as a possibility for a future Athenaeum topic. A bit later in the summer I chanced to come across a copy of the fictionalized graphic novel, written by Max Brooks, featured in my driveway moment and that cemented my topic for this evening.

The **369th Infantry Regiment** or as they are better known: The **Harlem Hellfighters**.

The 369th Infantry Regiment, formerly known as the 15th New York National Guard Regiment, was an infantry regiment of the New York Army National Guard during World War I and World War II. The Regiment consisted mainly of African Americans, though it also included a number of Puerto Rican Americans during World War II. It was known for being the first African American regiment to serve with the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I. Before the 15th New York National Guard Regiment was formed, any African American that wanted to fight in the war had to enlist in the French or Canadian armies. The regiment was nicknamed the Harlem Hellfighters," the "Black Rattlers," and the "Men of Bronze," which was given to the regiment by the French. *"We did not give ourselves our name the 'Harlem Hellfighters,"* said Col. Reginald Sanders, a former commander of the 369th Sustainment Brigade, which descended from the original World War I unit. *"Our enemies gave us our name, [which] is an honor."* The nickname Hell Fighters was given to them by the Germans due to their toughness and the fact that they never lost a man through capture, lost a trench or a foot of ground to the enemy.

On October 5, 1917 Emmett J. Scott, long time secretary to Booker T. Washington, was appointed Special Assistant to Newton D. Baker, the Secretary of War. Scott was to serve as a confidential advisor in situations that involved the well-being of ten million African Americans and their roles in the war. While many African Americans who served in the Great War believed racial discrimination would dissipate once they returned home, that did not happen. Racism after World War I was probably at its worst until the start of World War II. So with this white discrimination of African American soldiers, these troops were often sent to Europe where they were used to fill vacancies in the French armies. Unlike the British, the French held a high opinions of black soldiers, which made for a more positive environment when working together. Ironically this made African American troops more passionate about fighting for the U.S. This newly created patriotism by African Americans then led to the creation of the 15th Infantry Regiment.

Although many African Americans were eager to fight in the war, they were often turned away from military service. When the United States realized that it did not have close to enough soldiers, it decided to pass the Selective Service Act of 1917 which required all men from the ages of 21 to 30 to register for the draft; this included African Americans as well. This would give African Americans the opportunity that they needed to try and change the way they were perceived by their white counterparts.

Once the U.S. entered into World War I, many African Americans believed that entering the armed forces would help eliminate racial discrimination throughout the United States. Many African Americans felt it was "a God-sent blessing" so they could prove they deserved respect from their white counterparts through service in the armed forces. Through the efforts of the Central Committee of Negro College Men and President Wilson, a special training camp to train black officers for the proposed black regiments was established.

The 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry was called into Federal service on 25 July 1917 at Camp Whitman, New York. While at Camp Whitman, the 15th Infantry learned basic military practices. These basics included military courtesy, how to address officers and how to salute. Along with these basics they also learned how to stay low and out of sight during attacks, stand guard and how to march in formation. After their training at Camp Whitman, the 15th was called into active duty in New York. While in New York, the 15th was split into three battalions in which they guarded rail lines, construction sites and other camps throughout New York. Then on October 8, 1917 the Regiment traveled to Camp Wadsworth in Spartanburg, South Carolina, where they received training in actual combat. Camp Wadsworth was set up similar to the French battlefields. While at Camp Wadsworth they experienced significant racism from the local communities and from other units. There was one incident in which two soldiers from the 15th Regiment, Lieutenant Europe and Noble Sissle, were refused by the owner of a shop when they attempted to buy a newspaper. Several soldiers from the white 27th Division, a New York National Guard unit, came to aid their fellow soldiers. Lieutenant Europe had commanded them to leave before violence erupted. There were many other shops that refused to sell goods to the members of the 15th Regiment, so members of the 27th Division told the shop owners that if they did not serve black soldiers that they can close their stores and leave town. The white soldiers then stated: "They're our buddies. And we won't buy from men who treat them unfairly."

The 15th Infantry Regiment (New York Army National Guard) was assigned on December 1, 1917 to the 185th Infantry Brigade. It was commanded by Col. William Hayward, a member of the Union League Club of New York, which sponsored the 369th in the tradition of the 20th U.S. Colored Infantry, which the club had sponsored in the U.S. Civil War. The soldiers of the 15th were lucky in many ways compared to other African American military units in France in 1918. They enjoyed a continuity of leadership. Col. Hayward commanded the 15th throughout the war. Unlike many white

officers serving in the black regiments, Colonel Hayward respected his troops, dedicated himself to their well-being, and leveraged his political connections to secure support from New Yorkers. The unit was relegated to labor service duties instead of combat training. The 185th Infantry Brigade was assigned on January 5, 1918 to the 93rd Division [Provisional].

The 15th Infantry Regiment (New York Army National Guard) was reorganized and redesignated on March 1, 1918 as the 369th Infantry Regiment, but the unit continued labor services while it awaited a decision as to its future.

The U.S. Army decided on April 8, 1918 to assign the unit to the French Army for the duration of American participation in the war, because many white American soldiers refused to perform combat duty with blacks. The men were issued French weapons, helmets, belts, and pouches, although they continued to wear their U.S. uniforms. While in the United States, the 369th Regiment was subjected to intense racial discrimination, and its members looked down upon. It suffered considerable harassment by both individual white American soldiers and even unfounded criticism by the American Expeditionary Force headquarters which went so far as to release the notorious pamphlet *Secret Information Concerning Black American Troops*, which "warned" French civilian authorities of the alleged inferior nature and supposed rapist tendencies of African Americans.

In France, the 369th was treated as if they were no different from any other French unit. The French did not show hatred towards them and did not racially segregate the 369th. The 369th finally felt what it was like to be treated equally. The French accepted the all black 369th Regiment with open arms and welcomed them to their country. The French were less concerned with race than the Americans, due to manpower shortages.

The 369th Infantry Regiment was relieved May 8, 1918 from assignment to the 185th Infantry Brigade, and went into the trenches as part of the French 16th Division. It served continuously to July 3rd. The regiment returned to combat in the Second Battle of the Marne. Later the 369th was reassigned to Gen. Lehoucq's 161st Division to participate in the Allied counterattack. On one tour they were out for over 6 months which was the longest deployment of any unit in World War I. On August 19th, the regiment went off the line for rest and training of replacements.

While overseas, the Hellfighters saw enemy propaganda intended for them. It claimed Germans had done nothing wrong to blacks, and they should be fighting the U.S., which had oppressed them for years. It had the opposite of the intended effect.

On September 25, 1918 the Fourth French Army went on the offensive in conjunction with the American drive in the Meuse-Argonne. The 369th turned in a good account in heavy fighting, sustaining severe losses. They captured the important village of Séchault. At one point the 369th advanced faster than French troops on their right and left flanks, and risked being cut off. By the time the regiment pulled back to regroup, it had advanced 8.7 miles through heavy German resistance.

In mid-October the regiment was moved to a quiet sector in eastern France in the Vosges Mountains. It was there on November 11, the day of the Armistice. Six days later, the 369th made its last advance and on November 26, reached the banks of the river Rhine, the first Allied unit to reach it. The regiment was relieved on December 12, 1918 from assignment to the French 161st Division.

Two Medals of Honor and many Distinguished Service Crosses were awarded to members of the regiment. The most celebrated man in the 369th was Pvt. Henry Johnson, a former Albany, New York, railroad porter, who earned the nickname "Black Death" for his actions in combat in France. In May 1918 Johnson and Pvt. Needham Roberts fought off a 24-man German patrol, though both were severely wounded. After they expended their ammunition, Roberts used his rifle as a club and Johnson battled with a bolo knife. Reports suggest Johnson killed at least four German soldiers and might have wounded 15 others. Usually black achievements and valor went unnoticed, despite the fact over 100 men from the 369th were presented with American and/or French decorations. Among those honors, Johnson was the first American to receive the *Croix de Guerre*, the French equivalent to the American Medal of Honor.

Now any report concerning the famed 369<sup>th</sup> would be incomplete without at least a small shout out to its Regiment Band. The 369th Regimental band was relied upon not only in battle but also for morale. So by the end of their tour they became one of the most famous military bands throughout Europe. They followed the 369th overseas and were highly regarded and known for being able to immediately boost morale. While overseas the 369th Regiment made up less than 1% of the soldiers deployed, but were responsible for over 20% of the territory of all the land assigned to the United States. During the war the 369th's regimental band, under the direction of James Reese Europe, became famous throughout Europe. It introduced the until-then unknown music called jazz to British, French and other European audiences.

At the end of the war, the 369th returned to New York City, and on February 17, 1919, paraded through the city. This day became an unofficial holiday of sorts for all of Harlem. Many black school children were dismissed from school so that they could attend the parade. With the addition of many adults there were thousands of people that lined the streets to see the 369th Regiment: the parade began on Fifth Avenue at 61st Street, proceeded uptown past ranks of white bystanders, turned west on 110th Street, and then turned onto Lenox Avenue, and marched into Harlem, where black New Yorkers packed the sidewalks to see them. The parade became a marker of African American service to the nation, a frequent point of reference for those campaigning for civil rights. There were multiple parades that took place throughout the nation; many of these parades included all black regiments, including the 370th from Illinois. Then in the 1920s and 1930s, the 369th was a regular presence on Harlem's streets, each year marching through the neighborhood from their armory to catch a train to their annual summer camp, and then back through the neighborhood on their return two weeks later.

In 1933 the 369th Regiment Armory was created to honor the 369th Regiment for their service. This armory stands at 142nd and Fifth Avenue, in the heart of Harlem. This armory was constructed starting in the 1920s and was completed in the 1930s.

The 369th Regiment Armory was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994.

The infantry's polished post-World War I reputation was not completely safe from external criticism, which ultimately surfaced as a result of ongoing racial tension in the United States. In 1940 the *Chicago Defender* reported that the United States Department of War arranged for the 369th regiment to be renamed the 'Colored Infantry'. The department announced that there were too many infantry units in the National Guard and the 369th regiment would be among those slated to go, the first alleged step toward abolishing the famed unit. Supporters of the regiment swiftly objected to the introduction of racial identity in the title of a unit in the United States army, effectively preserving the regiment's reputation.

In 2003 the New York State Department of Transportation renamed the Harlem River Drive as the "Harlem Hellfighters Drive." On 29 September 2006 a twelve foot high monument was unveiled to honor the 369th Regiment. This statue is a replica of a monument that stands in France. The monument is made of black granite and contains the 369th crest and rattlesnake insignia.

Descending units of the 369th Infantry Regiment have continued to serve since World War I. The 369th Infantry Regiment continued to serve up until World War II where they would be reorganized into the 369th Anti-aircraft Artillery Regiment. The newly formed regiment would serve in Hawaii and throughout much of the West Coast. Subsequently, the 369th Anti-aircraft Artillery Regiment would also be reformed into the present-day 369th Sustainment Brigade.