

The Harlem Hellfighters: Scorned by Compromise, Exalted through Combat, Tried by Racial Conflict

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Historical Paper

Paper Length: 2,182 Words

Imposed restrictions on ability result in two opposing options: either resignation to those limitations or motivation to exceed expectations. History is made when humans overcome staggering obstacles in the face of extreme antagonism. One inspiring example occurred in the United States' segregated military when a black infantry distinguished itself by fighting heroically despite unfair discrimination from its government. After the U.S. Army compromised its stance against amalgamation during World War I, the French welcomed the American 369th Infantry under their command. Finally given a chance to see combat, this black military unit fought valiantly, earning French medals and the respected nickname "Hellfighters," all the while enduring ongoing racial conflict from their own country.

The early 1900s in the United States were times of trouble for African-Americans. Approximately fifty years after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, people of color still faced racial prejudice despite the Fourteenth Amendment granting them citizenship rights. African-Americans faced racial terrorism from the Ku Klux Klan, lynching mobs, and other white supremacist groups. In the 1896 *Plessy V. Ferguson* case, even the Supreme Court ruled Jim Crow laws -- which enforced racial segregation -- constitutional as long as conditions for both races were equal in quality (Bradley, David, and Fisher vol. 1). However, segregated public transportation and other services were seldom comparable. Blacks not only suffered from inferior schools, libraries, restrooms, and seating on buses, but were also constantly reminded of the enforced pecking-order by signs stating "Whites Only" or "Colored" ("Jim Crow Laws"). During this time of

apartheid, the U.S. military also reflected society's racial conflict by segregating its forces.

Unlike most white army officers, Colonel William Hayward sympathized with African-Americans. He believed they could fight with equal determination and skill as any soldier. Colonel Hayward helped form the colored 15th New York National Guard in 1913 with both white and black officers instead of only white leadership (Mikkelsen). He would later be instrumental in this unit's success as its commander during the Great War.

The United States' entrance into World War I during April 1917 positioned Americans to make a pivotal impact approximately one year later. Russia signed an armistice with the enemy Germany in December 1917. That next spring, Germany -- no longer fighting a war on two fronts -- could focus as many as 260 divisions on the Western Front against the Allies' 169 war-weary divisions (Neiberg, Michael S., and Johnson). For the Allies to have a prospect at stopping the expected German attack, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces General Pershing estimated that the United States needed at least 24 of their own divisions on the Western Front by June 1918 (Neiberg, Michael S., and Johnson). The 15th New York National Guard, renamed the 369th Infantry, would serve in this area as part of a division.

The 369th Infantry started its training in prejudiced Spartanburg, South Carolina where its men experienced racial conflict and discrimination (Harlem Hellfighters: Black Soldiers in World War I). Because of a recent clash between a different black unit-in-training and a lynching mob, Colonel Hayward stressed strict military discipline

during the 369th Infantry's training. That skirmish in Houston, Texas had resulted in the slaughter of four black soldiers and fifteen white civilians, the execution of nineteen black soldiers, the life-sentence of sixty-six black soldiers, and the punishment of labor duty for the rest of that unit as well as exclusion from combat duty (Brooks and White p. 37-42). To avoid a similar deadly outcome, the 369th Infantry endured derogatory comments, insulting actions such as town residents forcing the soldiers off the sidewalks, and local threats of hostile assault without retaliating (Harlem Hellfighters: Black Soldiers in World War I).

Although trained for battle action, the 369th Infantry served the U.S. Army through manual labor for its first three months in France after arriving on January 1, 1918 (Goldenberg). The common perception at this time in history that black individuals could not fight as aptly as white soldiers manifested itself in the U.S. Army where 80% of African-American soldiers were organized as non-combat units (Vogt, Lora, et al). The men from the 369th Infantry tolerated months of unloading ships, digging latrines, and constructing roads, bridges, and trenches while yearning to fight for the ideals of democracy and equality. Prominent white New York attorney William Haywood and white Colonel Hayward petitioned General Pershing to allow the 369th Infantry to fight. The 369th Infantry was eventually transferred to the French 161st Division for combat duty in mid-spring (Goldenberg).

The 369th Infantry's assignment under French command and chance for its men to distinguish themselves on the battlefield was made possible by an earlier compromise. When the United States entered into World War I in April 1917, President

Wilson and General Pershing stood firmly against integrating American and Allied troops. Most U.S. citizens

“looked at the enormous casualty levels on the Western Front and recoiled against the thought of their young men being used as cannon fodder by European generals... Wilson and his political advisors also recognized that an amalgamated American force would not allow for a distinctive American presence on the Western Front. Wilson knew that he would need to be able to point to an American contribution to victory if he were to represent American interests in any post-war peace conference” (qt. from Neiberg, Michael S., and Johnson).

However, British and French desperately needed reinforcements and doubted that U.S. troops could be effective in modern warfare without veteran French and British guidance. In December 1917, the United States and other Allies signed an agreement stating “‘the President agrees to the American forces being, if necessary, amalgamated with the French and British units as small as the company.’ The final decision on the level of amalgamation was to be Pershing's” (qt. in Neiberg, Michael S., and Johnson). The United States compromised its ideal so that experienced British and French officers would command battle strategies to prevent excess casualties. (Neiberg, Michael S., and Johnson).

While unwilling to integrate the majority of its troops, the United States' attitude toward amalgamation changed in regard to its black soldiers. Many white U.S. troops were unwilling to fight alongside their colored countrymen. Assigning the 369th Infantry

under French command in accordance with the amalgamation compromise of December 1917 seemed the most convenient way to satisfy Colonel Hayward and Attorney Haywood but still maintain segregation in the U.S. Army. From the army's perspective "[the 369th Infantry] was given to France as a throwaway [force]" described historian Max Brooks ("The Harlem Hellfighters") so that France could replenish its dwindling frontlines. Stationed in the trenches on the Western Front where the war had halted in a bloody stalemate since Germany's first advance in 1914 ("World War I" p. 128-129), most assumed the 369th Infantry would not distinguish itself from the other regiments which had not received glory for their sacrifices.

Unlike the U.S. Army, the French Army managed and rewarded the 369th Infantry without discrimination. The French, accustomed to people of color in their society, cared more about these fresh black troops' effort in battle than about their skin color (Goldenberg). France recognized the 369th Infantry's superior fighting by awarding its men highly-esteemed medals ("World War I & the Harlem Hellfighters"). In contrast, in August 1918 the U.S. Army sent a memo entitled "Secret Information Concerning Black American Troops" to "the French Military Mission stationed with the American Army" (qt. in "A French Directive"). This message aimed to discourage Frenchmen from treating African-American troops with equal respect. The letter told the French not to spoil black U.S. troops so that those men did not push for equal racial treatment back in the United States and upset white citizens ("A French Directive"). The letter's conclusion states the following:

“The black man is regarded by the white American as an inferior being with whom relations of business or service only are possible...We cannot deal with them on the same plane as with the white American officers without deeply wounding the latter. We must not eat with [African-Americans], must not shake hands or seek to talk or meet with them outside of the requirements of military service” (qt. in “A French Directive”).

Fortunately, this memo had no effect on France’s treatment of black U.S. soldiers.

Under the French, the 369th Infantry embraced its opportunity to conquer Germans and prove that its men’s fighting ability was not hampered by skin color. The infantry fought in the Allied defense of the final German offensive as well as the Allied offense that forced Germany to surrender (Mikkelsen). The last effort of the Germans to win the war, the Ludendorff Offensive, began March 21, 1918 and turned into the deepest advances by either side in the stalemate area of the Western Front since 1914 (“Why did the German...”). The German assault failed due to “[Germany’s] inadequate supplies, stubborn Allied defensive tactics, an over reliance on German Stormtroopers, and the German military overestimation of their offensive capabilities” (“Why did the German...”). Besides helping stop this German advance, the 369th Infantry played a role in the Allied Aisne-Marne Offensive and the Allied Meuse-Argonne Offensive. After halting a 23-German-division attack near the Marne River in July of 1918, the Allied counter-offensive resulted in a decisive victory that became known as the Aisne-Marne Offensive (Boyd). Also concluding in Allied victory, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive ended the Great War as the final push of the Allies from September through November 1918

cut off vital German rail communications and broke through the last German defensive line (“The Meuse-Argonne Offensive...”). Seeing more combat action than any other U.S. regiment, 161 consecutive days on the front line, the 369th Infantry battled courageously and suffered 1,500 casualties. The infantry’s heroic fighting earned 171 of its men the French Croix de Guerre medal that commemorated individual acts of bravery. Even Germans recognized the power displayed by the 369th Infantry on the battlefield by naming the African-American soldiers “Hellfighters.” These men from New York City are most commonly remembered as the Harlem Hellfighters today (“World War I & the Harlem Hellfighters”).

Perhaps the most famous Hellfighter is Sergeant Henry Johnson. In May of 1918, a German raiding party ambushed Private Needham Roberts and Johnson while the two served sentry duty. Johnson prevented the Germans from taking wounded Roberts captive, in the process suffering severe wounds himself. Amazingly, he killed four Germans and warded off as many as thirty-two with only the butt of his broken rifle and his bolo knife. For this act of valor Johnson became one of the first Americans awarded the French Croix de Guerre medal (“Sergeant Henry Johnson...”). Unfortunately, his bravery would not be recognized by the United States until more than 75 years later. Meanwhile, his wounds left him unable to work, and he died penniless in 1929 (Merlis). Johnson would be posthumously presented the United States Purple Heart in 1996, Distinguished Service Cross in 2002, and Congressional Medal of Honor in 2015 (“Sergeant Henry Johnson...”).

Amid unjust discrimination from its country, the 369th Infantry enjoyed its moment of glory upon its homecoming. Although denied the privilege of walking in a send-off parade in New York when deployed or a victory parade in Paris after the war's end, the Hellfighters marched their own parade in their home New York City on February 17, 1919. *The New York Tribune* described these black men in a praising tone: "Up the wide avenue they swung. Their smiles outshone the golden sunlight. In every line proud chests expanded beneath the medals valor won" (qt. in "Throngs Pay Tribute..."). Crowds of mixed color threw flowers and cheered for the Hellfighters, especially for Sergeant Henry Johnson. Some stood weeping for the infantry's 800 dead. "Never [had] white Americans accorded so heartfelt and hearty reception of a contingent of their black countrymen" (qt. in "Throngs Pay Tribute..."). When the 369th Infantry reached Harlem, its home section of New York City, it received a grand welcome ceremony and lunch in an armory, after which its men were allowed to reunite with loved ones ("Throngs Pay Tribute..."). However, as peace offered citizens a return to normal living, whites' appreciation of African-American World War I veterans soon faded. Sadly, the 1920s would see a dramatic increase in lynchings of black men in the United States (Bradley, David, and Fisher vol. 1), and the U.S. Army would not be desegregated until 1948 ("Executive Order...").

The homecoming festivities proved that even if the U.S. government did not, individual citizens did respect the heroic deeds of the 369th Infantry. Through blood, sweat, and tears, the Hellfighters from Harlem had overcome white Americans' scornful presumptions to earn an esteemed reputation and nickname that would go down in

history, dispelling the perception that African-Americans were inferior fighters to white soldiers. The men of the 369th Infantry, undeterred by racial conflict in their own country, battled valiantly for the principles of liberty and international justice. If not for the amalgamation compromise, it is highly doubtful that these men would have had an opportunity to represent African-Americans so effectively in the Great War. Forty years later, famous civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in his 1958 book *Stride Toward Freedom: the Montgomery Story*, "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals." (qt. in "MLK Quote of the Week...") Although Martin Luther King, Jr., did not specifically refer to the men of the 369th Infantry as he wrote this observation, the Hellfighters could truly be cited among those selfless, unsung heroes whose service helped the ideal of racial equality take a small step forward.

Appendix



"Members of the 369th in combat on the Western Front" picture and caption from mashable.com/2015/11/18/harlem-hellfighters/#eSiNkWwY98qm.



"Soldiers of the 369th wearing the Cross of War medal pose for a photo on their trip back to New York."
picture and caption from mashable.com/2015/11/18/harlem-hellfighters/#eSiNkWWy98qm.



“Sgt. Henry Johnson of the 369th poses wearing the Cross of War, awarded for bravery in an outnumbered battle against German forces.” picture and caption from mashable.com/2015/11/18/harlem-hellfighters/#eSiNkWwY98qm.



"Feb. 17, 1919. The 369th parades up Fifth Avenue upon their return to New York." picture and caption from mashable.com/2015/11/18/harlem-hellfighters/#eSiNkWwY98qm.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Interviews

Interview of African-American World War I veteran Robert L. by Mark Beveridge, and Elizabeth Pessek May 23, 1980. transcript published on <http://theworldwar.pastperfectonline.com>

Although Robert Sweeny never came into contact with the the 369th Infantry, I considered his interview a primary source describing World War I and the treatment African-Americans received from the United States and from French troops. I found it fascinating to read about that from someone on the receiving end of that treatment. Sweeny served in France with the 317th Sanitation Train in the 92nd Division. He started his service in April 1918. He described his job: "I checked the records and each one of four ambulance companies in the Sanitary Train had to send their ration report. We would figure up the subsistence in rations that they needed, and that was my duty in the supply department." In France he served with an ambulance company and learned how to inject a man, make a tourniquet, keep a man from bleeding. Although he never met the 369th Infantry, he remembers the frontlines, his metal helmet and gasmask, and his time in France. He said that "[the French Negro Officers] didn't have too much to do with the American Negro. They felt themselves superior to us and I guess they had a right to because the French people gave them that type of feeling because they were officers." However, he got along nicely with most of the French. In France he felt "that was the only time that I was a full-fledged American citizen because they treated the black soldiers just like they treated the white soldiers. No difference whatever. France is a wonderful country... [the French] had a great respect and admiration for [the negro soldier]. Sweeny also remembers the injustices black Americans faced during the war from the U.S. such as allowing captured German soldiers to eat before they did. He didn't think that the American people appreciated what their Negro soldiers did in World War I at that time in History. "After Negro soldiers had been discharged out of the Army, some people didn't want them to wear that American uniform. They were treated badly all through the South, even [by] the Adjutant General and the people who controlled the 92nd Division [the African-American division in which he served]. When I was discharged, instead of discharging me out of Hqts. 317 Sanitary Train they discharged

me out of some kind of labor battalion. That shows on my discharge now. In other words, the American white man did everything to play you down and degrade you and not let you think you had been over there to fight to make the world safe for democracy. They wanted to put you in your place. That came from Washington all the way down. In other words, [they] always tried to make me think that I have a certain place. That never bothered me, because I never let it bother me... that is the attitude of the American white man toward the American Negro. And that condition probably prevails somewhat today.”

Newspapers

“Throngs Pay Tribute to Heroic 15th.” *New York Tribune*, 18 Feb. 1919, pp. 1,8, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1919-02-18/ed-1/seq-1/.

This long article detailed the New York City and Harlem welcome parade for the 369th Infantry. The New York City streets were packed with cheering crowds that had put aside racial prejudice to welcome the 15th New York National Guard Regiment home. According to the article, “never have white Americans accorded so heartfelt and hearty reception of a contingent of their black countrymen...the blood they spilled in France was as red as any other.” Colonel Hayward led the marching troops, slightly limping from an overseas injury and his face still showing signs of illness from German poison gas. The article said that those marching showed perfect military discipline, while those injured and riding in automobiles -- like war hero Sergeant Henry Johnson -- waved and bowed to the crowd. When the troops arrived in their hometown section of the city, “it seemed all Harlem had assembled, and the pandemonium that broke loose when the first platoon of the olive drab figures neared the corner would have done credit to the lungs of forty Harlems.” In the 71st Regiment Armory the 369th Infantry was welcomed home, served lunch, and allowed to greet loved ones while their band played. Colonel Hayward’s only regret on that day was that the French Generals Gouraud and Le Bouc couldn’t see the welcome New York gave the Harlem Hellfighters. I learned from this article that about 800 soldiers from the 369th never made it home alive and that some people in the crowd were weeping instead of celebrating.

Photos

“Mashable.com.” *Mashable.com*,
mashable.com/2015/11/18/harlem-hellfighters/#eSiNkWwY98qm.

This website displayed photos of the Harlem Hellfighters, their band, Sergeant Henry Johnson, and action shots of them fighting in France and marching in their Harlem New York City homecoming parade. It was interesting to see the men in uniform, and seeing images helped me to picture what I read in my research. I also used a few images from this website in my appendix.

Wartime Documents

“A French Directive.” *The Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition*, Yale University, glc.yale.edu/french-directive.

On this website I was able to read the quoted the memo “Secret information concerning the Black American Troops” sent from the U.S. Army “to the French Military Mission stationed with the American Army” filled with prejudiced toward African-Americans. The message discouraged the French from treating black U.S. military personnel as equals or building relationships with them so that similar spoiling would not be demanded in the United States. This quote shows the gist of the letter: “[white Americans] are afraid that contact with the French will inspire in black Americans’ aspirations which to them (the whites) appear intolerable. It is of the utmost importance that every effort be made to avoid profoundly estranging American opinion. Although a citizen of the United States, the black man is regarded by the white American as an inferior being with whom relations of business or service only are possible. The black is constantly being censured for his want of intelligence and discretion, his lack of civic and professional conscience, and for his tendency toward undue familiarity.” I find it fascinating that the memo is dated August 7, 1918, and the 369th Infantry had been fighting since April.

Secondary Sources

Books

Adams, Simon, and Andy Crawford. *World War I*. Dorling Kindersley, 2014.

This history book described the many aspects of World War I. I learned facts about topics varying from World War I flying aces to soldiers' uniforms and equipment to miserable trench living conditions to timelines of major battles. I read that generally the armies would rotate troops in and out of the trenches every couple weeks. Trenches were built with passages leading farther from the frontline to headquarters, temporary hospitals, and places where women washed uniforms and baked food. Trenches were also built in a zig-zag so that machine guns could not fire at all parts of trenches without re-adjusting aim. Through this source I gained a more complete picture of how both sides fought the war and of what the Hellfighters experienced while fighting.

Bradley, David, and Shelley Fisher. Fishkin. "African Americans." *The Encyclopedia of Civil Rights in America*, vol. 1, Sharpe Reference, 1998.

This was a good resource to start my research because summarized the history of African-American civil rights in the United States, opening my mind to the evil extent of prejudice black Americans endured. I learned that from early on in its colonization, America's slaves had virtually no rights compared to slaves in other countries who could be freed or adopted into a community after so many years of service. This made angry slaves tend to rebel against their wealthy masters. To keep poor colonists from joining slave revolts, slaveholders started spreading lies about the "inferiority" of blacks based on color of skin. Americans chose imported Africans as ideal slaves for several key reasons: they could not blend into white communities with their contrasting skin color, they did not know the North American land and weather well enough to escape, and they were skilled in agriculture. From this source I also learned more about the Black Laws passed in the South after the 13th and 14th Amendments ended slavery and made African-Americans U.S. citizens. Especially after Reconstruction ended in the South and U.S. troops were withdrawn, the rights granted to African-Americans were hardly protected and mostly ignored. These laws denied colored people equal access to education, medical care, housing, employment, legal protection, and the use of public accommodations and facilities. Vagrancy laws made it illegal for black men to be unemployed. As punishment, they could be jailed and forced into bonded labor -- essentially slavery -- to Southern farmers. The black man's struggle for civil rights and

social justice survived acts of violence, racial discrimination, and extreme prejudice which would continue through World War I to the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. African-Americans still experience prejudice today.

“The Harlem Hellfighters.” *The Harlem Hellfighters*, by Max Brooks and Caanan White, Duckworth Overlook, 2015, pp. 37–43.

This graphic novel made me aware of the clash between a white lynching mob and a black unit-in-training in Houston, Texas occurring shortly before the 369th Infantry trained in South Carolina. Because that fight had resulted in the death of fifteen white civilians and four black soldiers, the black unit had been punished and banned from combat duty in World War I. This source helped me understand that Colonel Hayward intentionally drilled the 369th Infantry in military discipline so that no similar fiasco would happen to his troops.

“World War I.” *When on Earth?: History as You’ve Never Seen It Before*, 1st ed., DK Publishing, 2015, pp. 128–129.

This children’s atlas map of Western Europe showed where and described the main battles of World War I, including the battle of Chateau Thierry in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. I learned that the Western Frontline did not fluctuate much from 1914 to 1916.

Miles, Lisa, and Mandy Ross. “World War One.” “the Wider War.” “Peace After War.” *The Usborne Illustrated Atlas of the 20th Century*, EDC Publishing, 1997, pp. 6–12.

I learned about the start of World War I from this source. Before war broke out, Austria had annexed Bosnia, but Serbia had also wanted control over Bosnia. A Serbian nationalist assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne in the Bosnia’s capital city. Austria declared war on Serbia, and because of European tensions, rivalries, and treaties, war soon spread to include most of Europe and part of the Middle East. Germany planned to quickly attack and defeat France and then turn to defeat Russia. I learned that the battle of the Marne stopped Germans 50 miles from Paris and the battle of Ypres prevented Germans from reaching ports on the English Channel. The Western Front across Belgium and northeastern France became a network of trenches as war dragged on in a stalemate. On the Eastern front in Russia, the Russians suffered many casualties. When the Bolsheviks took over, the new Russian government made peace with Germany. In the Middle East, Arabia revolted against the Ottoman Empire and its

allies of Germany and Austro-Hungary. After German submarines attacked and killed many of her citizens at sea, the United States entered World War I in April 1917 to reinforce the war-weary Allied Forces with resources and men. As the Allies gained control of the sea and Germany's raw materials and food ran low, the Central Powers eventually surrendered. The Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to take on the guilt of causing the war, to significantly reduce its forces, to pay reparations to the Allies and to give up its land in Africa and along the Rhine. The Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire were broken up into smaller nations after WWI.

Online Documents

“Executive Order 9981: Desegregation of the Armed Forces (1948).” *Our Documents - Executive Order 9981: Desegregation of the Armed Forces (1948)*, www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=84#.

After I learned that the U.S. Army was desegregated in 1948, I searched the Truman Library website to verify this fact. I viewed President Truman's executive order on July 26, 1948 that demanded the desegregation the U.S. Armed Forces to ensure “the highest standards of democracy, with equality of treatment and opportunity for all those who serve in our country's defense.” Truman even created a committee “authorized on behalf of the President to examine into the rules, procedures and practices of the armed services in order to determine in what respect such rules, procedures and practices may be altered or improved with a view to carry out the policy of this order.”

Videos

Merlis, George, director. *Harlem Hellfighters*. YouTube, History Channel, 1997, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNhi2pN2zk4.

This 50-minute documentary contained World War I footage and interviews of Harlem Hellfighter veterans along with a detailed account of the 369th Infantry during WWI. It was interesting to me that white Colonel Hayward helped form the colored 15th New York National Guard Infantry Regiment with both white and black officers from its formation. Also the unit's band recruited talented colored musicians and became a hit when it toured Allied-controlled Europe and introduced France to jazz music. I learned that the 15th New York National Guard, which became 369th Infantry, never completely finished its training in the United States because of prejudice from the town near which it trained. Instead, it was sent France for labor duty and eventually assigned to combat

duty under the French flag. The United States had intended to keep African-Americans from the battle lines, stationing most black units away from fighting. This documentary informed me that Germans tried to discourage the Hellfighters with propaganda, reminding them that they were fighting for democracy serving a country in which they did not receive equality. One veteran said he did not pay much attention to the Germans because he and his unit were “whoopin’ them.” He also remembered the French welcoming them with no prejudice, but other American troops treated them contemptuously. The Hellfighters were welcomed back to Harlem, New York City, but were soon forgotten after the band director was killed by a veteran in a fight. Many from the 369th Infantry did not get good jobs when they returned to the United States.

“The Harlem Hellfighters.” History.com,
www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/world-war-i-history/videos/the-harlem-hellfighters.

While deciding what topic to research, this video about the Harlem Hellfighters by History.com caught my interest. For seven minutes, historians gave a summary of the black 369th Infantry bravely fighting for a country that harshly discriminated against it during World War I. “[The 369th Infantry] was given to France as a throwaway [force]” as historian Max Brooks is quoted. These men came home as one of the most decorated units of the U.S. army. I found the Hellfighters’ accomplishment despite all the prejudice they faced very inspiring.

“U.S. Entry into World War I.”
www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/john-j-pershing.

From this short video, I reviewed how the United States was persuaded to join World War I. Even though President Wilson campaigned on keeping the U.S. out of war, he declared war on the Central Powers after Germany decided to revive unrestricted submarine warfare and, in a message intercepted by the British, promised to return U.S. land to Mexico if they sided with Germany when the United States entered the war. Just as the United States joined the Allied forces, Russia dropped out of the War. With Germany now focusing on the Western Front, the winter of 1917-18 became a race to move U.S. troops to back up French and British troops before Germany advanced.

Websites

Boyd, Laura. "The Aisne-Marne Campaign." *The National Museum of the United States Army*, 15 July 2013, [thenmusa.org/nmusa-blog.php?d=7](https://www.thenmusa.org/nmusa-blog.php?d=7).

From this source I learned that the Aisne-Marne Campaign began east of the city of Reims, France, when 23 German Divisions attacked the French Fourth Army on July 15, 1918. After three days of heavy fighting, the Allies were able to hold back the German Offensive. The Allies had previously planned a massive counterattack in this area, and as the German army weakened, the Allies launched their own offensive. The Allies won a victory that marked the beginning of a series of triumphs that led to the end of World War I in three months.

Goldenberg, Colonel Richard. "African-American WWI 'Harlem Hell Fighters' Proved Their Mettle, Patriotism in Combat." *Www.army.mil*, 1 Feb. 2018, www.army.mil/article/199913/african_american_wwi_harlem_hell_fighters_proved_their_mettle_patriotism_in_combat.

From the U.S. Army website I learned that when the Harlem Hellfighters arrived in France as the 369th Infantry in January 1918, they first served by constructing roads, building bridges, digging trenches, and performing other jobs. This way the U.S. Army had cheap labor and did not have to worry about mixing black and white troops. Colonel Hayward petitioned for his men to see fighting by writing letter to and visiting General Pershing's headquarters. After some three months of labor and constructing railways, the 369th Infantry received orders to join the French 16th Division for three weeks of combat training. The source says "[the 369th Infantry] would be assigned to fight with French forces. This solved the dilemma for Pershing and the American Expeditionary Forces of what to do with the African-American troops." The French were used to serving with many races in their ranks and welcomed the 369th Infantry. After learning valuable lessons in trench warfare from the French, these black soldiers finally entered the front lines and proved their worth as combat troops. They held their line against the last German offensive near Chateau-Thierry and also fought with French in the Aisne-Marne counter offensive in the summer of 1918. The regiment earned the nickname "Hellfighters" and received France's highest honor of World War I, the Croix de Guerre, for its unit actions, alongside some 171 individual decorations for heroism.

“Harlem Hellfighters: Black Soldiers in World War I.” *America Comes Alive*, 18 Dec. 2017, americacomesalive.com/2015/02/05/harlem-hellfighters-black-soldiers-world-war/.

This website argued that the 369th Infantry “is one of the most under-appreciated contributors to World War I [from the United States]” by bringing out the facts that the Hellfighters were on combat duty for 161 straight days, more than any other American unit, and suffered 1,500 casualties. The 369th Infantry fought heroically despite facing unjust racial discrimination. I read about its training in Spartanburg, South Carolina “Black men wearing the American military uniform inflamed the Southerners. The fear of assault by town residents was ever-present for the black troops, and if members of the 369th were on leave and in town, locals pushed them off the sidewalks.” I learned that when the 369th Infantry arrived in France on January 1, 1918, “for the first three months they were assigned to do manual labor, primarily unloading ships and digging latrines while their colonel argued that they should be allowed in combat. William Haywood, a prominent white New York attorney who enlisted to join the fight, felt strongly that the men should be allowed to be full participants. Haywood eventually got his way but there was a twist: Because the 369th soldiers were black, they were not permitted to fight alongside American troops.” These men were not allowed to march in victory parades in Paris and in the United States with other white units. They instead had their unit’s own parade when they arrived back in New York.

“History.” *History | U.S. Army in Europe*, www.eur.army.mil/organization/history.htm.

From the World War I history article on the U.S. Army webpage, I read a concise account of the U.S. Army in World War I. In May 1917, President Woodrow Wilson appointed Major General John Pershing to command the American Expeditionary Forces or AEF. In June 1917, 14,000 United States troops were stationed in France. In May 1918, that number increased to over one million U.S. troops, half of them fighting at the front lines. It was interesting to me that the article said “Pershing insisted that the American force would not be used merely to fill gaps in the French and British armies, and he resisted European efforts to have U.S. troops deployed as individual replacements in decimated Allied units.” The AEF fought on the Western Front during the Aisne, Saint-Mihiel, and Meuse-Argonne Offensives in 1918. Troops crossed the French-German border in December 1918 to occupy Germany, including eight U.S. divisions organized into three corps. After the Paris Peace talks in May 1919, The number of U.S. occupying troops was reduced to about 15,000 by the beginning of 1920. Because congress rejected the Treaty of Versailles, the United States officially

made peace with Germany in the summer of 1921 with a different treaty. The last U.S. occupying troops left Germany on January 24, 1923.

“Jim Crow Laws.” *PBS, Public Broadcasting Service*, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedom-riders-jim-crow-laws/.

This source taught me about the Jim Crow Laws that segregated Americans before and during the early 1900s. In 1896, the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* Supreme Court case ruled apartheid constitutional by the phrase “separate but equal.” These laws essentially allowed whites to enforce a racial pecking order placing colored people below themselves by hanging humiliating signs prohibiting people of color from certain locations and services. Normally, the locations and services reserved for whites were noticeably superior to those left to the colored folk.

“La Croix De Guerre.” *La Croix De Guerre | Chemins De Mémoire - Ministère De La Défense*, www.cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/en/la-croix-de-guerre.

From this website I learned the significance of the medal the Harlem Hellfighters received. The Croix de Guerre or “War Cross” was created by the French Parliament to commemorate individual acts of bravery in the Great War. The ribbon was striped green and red copying the ribbon of the Saint Helena medal Napoleon III created for the Napoleonic Wars' last veterans in 1857. Designed by sculptor Bartholomé, the bronze cross featured four flared arms and two crossed swords. In the centre of the cross, a “Marianne” head wearing a Phrygian cap, a French symbol and personification of liberty and reason, is encircled by a laurel wreath and has the words “République Française.” The backside of the medal bore the years of the war which was changed yearly until the war ended. The color of the star on the ribbon represented the rank of citation. Soldiers who received the medal wore it always, even in battle. Foreign soldiers and French civilians were allowed to receive the medal. In 1920, the Ministry of War listed 2,055,000 individual citations, not including those awarded the medal after death.

Mikkelsen, Edward. “369th Infantry Regiment ‘Harlem Hellfighters.’” *369th Infantry Regiment “Harlem Hellfighters” | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed*, www.blackpast.org/aah/369th-infantry-regiment-harlem-hellfighters.

From this source, I read specific details about the Harlem Hellfighters. I learned that the 369th Infantry Regiment was first organized as the 15th New York National Guard Infantry Regiment in 1913. This black unit was manned by both black and white officers. Its white commander Colonel William Hayward respected his black soldiers, cared about their well-being, and used his political connections to secure support from New

York. The 369th Infantry was federalized in 1917 and integrated into the French 161st Division when it began combat duty. “Spending over six months in combat, perhaps the longest of any American unit in the war, the 369th suffered approximately fifteen hundred casualties but received only nine hundred replacements. Unit histories claimed they were the first unit to cross the Rhine into Germany” according to the website. They earned the nickname “Harlem Hellfighters” from Germans because of how they fought at Chateau-Thierry, also known as the Aisne-Marne Offensive, and in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Well over 100 of these men received a French medal. The unit was welcomed home in February 1919 with a parade.

“MLK Quote of the Week: A Time for Vigorous and Positive Action.” *The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change*, 26 Dec. 2012, www.thekingcenter.org/blog/mlk-quote-week-time-vigorous-and-positive-action.

I searched for quotes by Martin Luther King, Jr., to use in my conclusion and found an excerpt from the 11th chapter of his 1958 book *Stride Toward Freedom: the Montgomery Story* on this website. I wanted a quote that would sum up my own opinion that it takes many self-sacrificing individuals, a large number of whom are unappreciated, to advance the cause of justice. In my opinion, the Hellfighters were one of many unknown African-American soldiers whose heroic actions and dedication to fighting for liberty lead to the desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces, but I did not find anything directly linking the 369th Infantry to this result. However, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., I could hint at that connection.

Neiberg, Michael S., and Harold K. Johnson. “Pershing's Decision: How the United States Fought Its First Modern Coalition War.” *Www.army.mil*, 10 Dec. 2010, www.army.mil/article/49291/pershings_decision_how_the_united_states_fought_its_first_modern_coalition_war.

This source taught me a lot about the United States’ policy against amalgamation and their compromise with the French and British. When the Russians signed an armistice with Germany in December 1917, General John Pershing knew that Germany would be able to concentrate as many as 260 divisions on the Western Front the next spring. The Allies only had 169 divisions against that number. Even though the U.S. had been at war since April 1917, only four United States infantry divisions -- short on equipment and training -- were in France in December because of the inefficiency of American mobilization. For the Allies to have a prospect at stopping the expected German attack, Pershing estimated that the United States needed to have at least 24 divisions on the

Western Front by June. The British and French suggested amalgamation or the integration of United States troops into existing British and French units to compensate for American officers' inexperience, and lack of familiarity of modern war technologies. "American troops would thereby be commanded at the tactical level by American junior officers, but the operational and strategic direction of American forces would be handled by more experienced Europeans." Both General Pershing and President Wilson were originally opposed to this idea as were many Americans. They feared that their men would be lost in the trenches and face endless casualties without German retreat. Wilson and Pershing wanted a distinct American force that would noticeably contribute to victory. This source says that "Pershing stubbornly held to his position that American forces would only fight under a completely American chain of command on a distinctly American section of the Western Front." However, Great Britain and France doubted that the United States Army had enough time to learn trench warfare and modern military tactics before the German spring offensive. Despite initial resistance, an agreement was signed in mid-December that stated President Wilson agreed that American forces could be amalgamated with French and British units as small as the company level if necessary. "Pershing ultimately decided to amalgamate at the division level, meaning that American soldiers took their orders from American officers up to the level of major general, but overall strategic direction came from more experienced French officers at the corps, army, and army group levels." This source says Pershing's decision saved thousands of American lives, worked well at the Second Battle of the Marne in July 1918, and provided General Dwight Eisenhower the model he used building his own coalition in World War II.

"Photographs of the 369th Infantry and African Americans during World War I."
National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/education/lessons/369th-infantry.

This site made me aware of black Americans' different views on World War I. "Participation in the war effort was problematic for African Americans. While America was on a crusade to make the world safe for democracy abroad, it was neglecting the fight for equality at home." I learned that A. Philip Randolph did not believe that colored people fighting in WWI would do much to advance the position of the colored folk, but W.E.B DuBois believed that blacks should fight alongside whites to defend democracy. Although 380,000 African Americans served in the army during WWI, only 200,000 were sent to Europe (mainly for support labor) and only about 42,000 from that number saw combat, including the 369th Infantry. When the Harlem Hellfighters returned home, they found many African-American families had moved North to fill jobs during the war. The Harlem Renaissance would soon blossom. According to this site "On the political front,

participation in World War I did little to directly advance the equal rights of African-Americans. But for many Americans both black and white, it did heighten awareness of the gulf that existed between American rhetoric and reality.” The site Quoted A. Philip Randolph after the war as saying "I want to congratulate you [African-Americans] for doing your bit to make the world safe for democracy... and unsafe for hypocrisy."

“Righting a Wrong Nearly 100 Years Later, Two Soldiers Receive Medal of Honor Posthumously.” *PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 2 June 2015,*
www.pbs.org/newshour/show/righting-wrong-nearly-100-years-later-two-soldiers-receive-medal-honor-posthumously.

From this site I learned that Henry Johnson received the Medal of Honor posthumously almost 100 years after serving. In his speech transcript, President Obama admitted that the reason Johnson was not awarded the medal during his life was because of his race.

“Sergeant Henry Johnson | Medal of Honor Recipient | The United States Army.”
ARMY.MIL Features, ARMY.MIL Features, www.army.mil/medalofhonor/johnson/.

This source described the heroic act Sergeant Henry Johnson for which was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart, the Distinguished Service Cross and the Medal of Honor. While on sentry duty, Johnson and private Needham Roberts were attacked by a German raiding party consisting of at least 12 and up to 32 soldiers. Needham Roberts was badly wounded, but Henry Johnson fought off the raid with his bolo knife, killing four Germans and saving Roberts from capture.

“The Meuse-Argonne Offensive, a World War I Online Interactive, Released.”
American Battle Monuments Commission, 24 June 2015,
www.abmc.gov/news-events/news/meuse-argonne-offensive-world-war-i-online-interactive-released#.WpYyRGinHre.

From this source I learned that the Meuse-Argonne Offensive began in September 1918 in France’s Argonne Forest. Through heavy, bloody fighting, the Allies succeeded in cutting off German rail communications and breaking through the last German defensive line, forcing Germany and the Central Powers to surrender and end World War I.

Vogt, Lora, et al. "National World War I Museum and Memorial." *National World War I Museum and Memorial*, Apr. 2017, www.theworldwar.org/.

The impact of African American soldiers' bravery in World War I was hard for me to discover in my research. However, through the National World War I Museum and Memorial's online exhibit, I read statements that confirmed my opinion that the heroics of black soldiers in war invalidated white supremacy and challenged prejudiced thinking. "African American involvement in this war did not end racial subjugation or segregation. But the act of putting a uniform on itself was, for some, an act of defiance, and for others, an act of unity and equality...That participation marked the beginning of a modern civil rights movement, a fight to define the true meaning of democracy." Along with this quote, the exhibit hints that the service and sacrifices of African Americans in World War I may have impacted President Truman, a World War I veteran under whom the U.S. Armed Forces were desegregated in 1948.

This exhibit also confirmed facts about heroics done by black troops and facts about the prejudice they faced i found in other research. Some new facts I learned from this exhibit included that 80% of African American soldiers in World War I were organized into supply, construction, and other non-combatant units; that African Americans made up 10% of the U.S. population but 13% of the total U.S. Armed Services during the war; and that two predominantly African American combat divisions were formed. The 92nd Division was under U.S. command while the 93rd Division, which included three infantry regiments along with the 369th, was under French command.

"Why Did the German Spring Offensive of 1918 Fail?" *DailyHistory.org*, dailyhistory.org/Why_did_the_German_Spring_Offensive_of_1918_fail%3F.

This source taught me about the last German offensive of World War I occurring on the Western Front. I learned that the main reason it failed was because Germany was too reliant and confident in its offense while running out of supplies. Also the stubborn Allied defense played a big part in the demise of the German offensive.

"World War I & The 'Harlem Hellfighters.'" *Black Americans in the US Military from the American Revolution to the Korean*, New York State Military Museum, dmna.ny.gov/historic/articles/blacksMilitary/BlacksMilitaryWW1.htm.

This article listed some of the facts and feats of the Harlem Hellfighters, including that the unit suffered approximately 1,500 casualties and that the unit also fought the longest

on the front (191 days) during the Champagne-Marne offensive. Germans soldiers, afraid of the 369th Infantry, first nicknamed its men "Hellfighters." This source showed how the U.S. government and General Pershing discriminated against the Hellfighters by making them fight under the French flag and even sending a memo to the French discouraging them from giving black U.S. troops honor or respect. I found it interesting to read about the supposed black man inferiority from short quotes of the "Secret Information Concerning Black American Troops" memo to the French. Fortunately, most of the French paid no attention to this letter.