

The Harlem Hellfighters: The most storied Black combat unit of World War I



On the Western Front of World War I, death did not discriminate.

Artillery screaming towards the trenches treated men of all color the same. But the soldiers of the 92nd and 93rd divisions lived segregated lives both in and out of war.

These all-Black units, which served under mostly white officers, readily took up arms with their fellow Americans, hopeful that their patriotism and service would lead to better treatment at home.

The 369th Infantry Regiment of the 93rd Division, formerly the 15th New York National Guard Regiment, was unique. They landed at Brest, France, in December of 1917. In March of 1918, the regiment began training under French command due to their need for replacements. Despite the expectation that this arrangement would be temporary, members of the 369th never served under American command during the war.

The Soldiers of the 369th called themselves the “Black Rattlers” and the unit crest still features a rattlesnake coiled to strike. The French called them “Hommes de Bronze” or Men of Bronze. But it was their German adversaries who gave them the name that stuck. The Germans called the Black Americans “Hollenkampfer”: German for Hellfighters.

In the end, the Harlem Hellfighters, as they were first dubbed by their German adversaries, spent more time in continuous combat than any other American unit of its size, with 191 days in the front-line trenches. As the 369th advanced, capturing towns and a key railroad junction, the losses mounted. In a matter of days, these advances cost the regiment 1500 killed and wounded, more than any other American regiment, while receiving only 900 replacements. In one offensive, the 369th outpaced French units on either side by seven miles.

They were the first unit of the French, British or American Armies to reach the Rhine River at the end of the war. The unit earned 11 French citations and a unit Croix de Guerre and 170 Soldiers were awarded the French Croix de Guerre.

Many of those soldiers are buried or memorialized at American military cemeteries overseas managed by the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC).

The all-Black 369th Division, or Harlem Hellfighters, returned home to New York City for a victory parade after fighting valiantly in World War I, Feb. 18, 1919. This was a marvelous gesture. But despite this celebration, little to nothing changed in their day-to-day lives. It would take another world war, and decades of civil rights activism before the hopes of these African American servicemen would start to be realized. Not one of the Hellfighters received any decorations or citations from the U.S. government. In fact, it would take another 77 years for Private Henry Johnson to receive an official Medal of Honor from his own government, and 83 years for the Army Center of Military History to approve the official special designation of the Harlem Hellfighters.