

‘Harlem Hellfighters’ Recognized

VFW remembers the Harlem Hellfighters, members of the 369th Infantry Regiment who last year received the Congressional Gold Medal

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More than a century after their sacrifices in World War I, members of the highly decorated 369th Infantry Regiment, better known as the “Harlem Hellfighters,” posthumously received the Congressional Gold Medal last year.

Presented by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Sept. 3, the award was accepted by a descendant of the Harlem Hellfighters, one of the most recognized African American combat units in The Great War, during a ceremony at Emancipation Hall in Washington, D.C.

“May we honor them forever, especially because they were not honored in their time,” Hegseth said during the ceremony, prior to presenting Debra Willett, the granddaughter of Sgt. Leander Willett, with the nation’s highest civilian honor given by Congress.

Willett accepted the Congressional Gold Medal on behalf of the more than 4,000 Harlem Hellfighters who served in the New York National Guard.

“I know that my grandfather and the other brave men who fought alongside him never thought that their courage and their exploits would be celebrated in such a revered setting,” Willett said during the ceremony. “They sacrificed, and they thought they were making a difference. And today proves that they did.”

WHO WERE THE HARLEM HELLFIGHTERS?

Made up of African American soldiers from New York, the 369th Infantry Regiment served under the 16th Division of the French army in World War I.

Initially nicknamed the “Black Rattlers” for the rattlesnake insignia that adorned their uniforms, members of the 369th were later called “Men of Bronze” by the French and dubbed “Hellfighters” by the German troops, who, according to the National Museum of

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

African American History & Culture (NMAAHC), believed them ferocious in combat.

This bravery and fierceness is highlighted in a well-known incident on May 15, 1918, in the Argonne Forest in France, between two of the most famed members of the Hellfighters, Private Henry Johnson and Private Needham Roberts, who fought off an entire German patrol despite being severely wounded and out of ammunition, according to the Smithsonian.

On that morning before dawn, both men stood guard when 12 German soldiers cut their way through the wire encircling their guard post. Johnson tossed a grenade in the enemy's direction, and after the blast, the German soldiers retaliated with gunfire and grenades of their own, immediately incapacitating the 17-year-old Roberts.

With limited help from Roberts, Johnson continued to hurl grenades until he ran out of them. He followed that with shots from his rifle, but it soon jammed. With the enemy close to touching distance, the 5-foot-4, 130-pound Johnson resorted to his bolo knife, hacking away in the dark, unwilling to let the enemy take Roberts.

'BLACK DEATH' EARNED MOH

Johnson, who earned the nickname "Black Death" as a result, saved Roberts and killed four German soldiers during the ambush, though he went on to suffer 21 injuries that included a shattered left foot and stab and bullet wounds across his body. For his efforts, Johnson posthumously received the Medal of Honor in 2015.

The Harlem Hellfighters went on to spend 191 days on the front lines, the most continuous combat seen by any American unit of its size, according to the NMAAHC. The regiment also suffered more than 1,400 casualties.

"The extraordinary courage of the Harlem Hellfighters earned them fame in Europe and America, as newspapers recounted their remarkable feats," according to the NMAAHC.

Because of their extraordinary service, the French government awarded the coveted Croix de Guerre medal to 171 members of the regiment following the war, as well as a Croix de Guerre citation to the unit as a whole. Others received military awards from the U.S., which included the Distinguished Service Cross and the MOH by Johnson.

The 369th Infantry Regiment also was the first New York unit to return home, according to the NMAAHC.

The regiment, which had been denied a place in the farewell parade the year before, received its own victory parade. On Feb. 17, 1919, New Yorkers came out in droves to cheer the 3,000 Harlem Hellfighters who marched up Manhattan's Fifth Avenue to the music of their renowned regimental jazz bandleader, James Reese Europe.

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