



## THE BATTLE FOR THE LEGACY OF THE 369<sup>TH</sup> INFANTRY REGIMENT

### Colonel William Hayward and the “Harlem Hellfighters” and the American Military High Command

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#### Overview

Much has been written about the most famous fighting unit amongst the Black units of the Great War. The 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment had one of the best combat records in the entire A.E.F. It is ironic that this unit did not fight with the American Army. It was doled out to elements of the French 4<sup>th</sup> Army; more about that later in the article.

Just a few of the achievements of this storied regiment: 191 days in forward positions was the most of any A.E.F. regiment, the entire regiment received the *Croix de Guerre*, 171 combatants received the *Croix de Guerre*, no soldier was ever taken prisoner, about 1,400 total casualties, the “Battle of Henry Johnson”, the famous Hellfighter Band, and the first American

unit to reach the Rhine River on November 20, 1918. A series of events and personalities had made all of these accomplishments possible, forming what was to become the legend of the Harlem Hellfighters.

#### The Beginnings

Before World War One began, in June 1913, New York governor William Sulzer, signed into law the establishment of a Negro National Guard Regiment. It was not until three years later that governor Charles Whitman authorized the formation of the regiment. He appointed William Hayward as the commander of the 15<sup>th</sup> N. Y. National Guard.



William Sulzer, 39<sup>th</sup> governor of New York, convicted on articles of impeachment for misusing campaign funds. During his ten months in office (January 1, 1913 — October 17, 1913) his most notable achievement was the establishment of a Negro National Guard Regiment. (Courtesy LOC)

Colonel Hayward moved from his home state of Nebraska to New York City, a few years before war broke out in Europe, after extensive traveling abroad. In 1911, he practiced law at the firm of Wing and Russell. In 1913, he became the assistant to the then district attorney, Charles Whitman. In 1914 and 1916, Hayward managed Whitman's campaigns for governor. Hayward served as the New York City Public Service Commissioner prior to being appointed colonel. He knew his way around Harlem. He worked with African American leaders, activists, aldermen, and businessmen during his tenure in the DA's office and as the Public Service Commissioner. For these reasons, Governor Whitman had great confidence in his selection.

### Hayward's Challenge

While the new colonel set out to form a full-strength regiment, the world was engulfed in a multiracial war. On the Western Front, the Battle of Verdun was in its fifth month of devastation, and the Battle of the Somme was just beginning. The Eastern and Italian fronts were ablaze while the biggest naval battle, Jutland, had just ended.

America was reluctantly preparing for "getting into the fight", and Hayward knew that his regiment and other Black regiments needed to be prepared to fight.



Colonel William Hayward playing baseball somewhere in France. (Courtesy NARA)

James Reese Europe, the famous jazz band conductor and Clef Club President. Joining for purely altruistic reasons to promote his race, in September, 1916, he soon earned a commission as a lieutenant of a machine gun company.



Lt. Jim Europe

Lieutenant James Reese Europe. (Courtesy E. Azalia Hackley Collection, Detroit Public Library)

The regiment's armory was the old Lafayette Dance Hall on 131<sup>st</sup>/132<sup>nd</sup> Streets and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The soldiers trained on the streets of Harlem and at Olympic Field nearby, without rifles and helmets. Eventually, they received an allotment of M1903 Springfield 30-06, five round, bolt action rifles.

Hayward was well aware of the political and cultural challenges that lay ahead. The 1917 'mutiny' of elements of the Black 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in Houston was still fresh in the minds of Southerners and military leaders in Washington. Sixteen people were killed, 64 soldiers were court martialed, and 13 of them were executed. This was the cost of the acrimony between the White populace, the police, and the soldiers of color.

The colonel and Lieutenant Europe collaborated on forming a regimental band. Army regulations limited a band to 28 members. This was not acceptable to the bandleader; he required at least 44 men. Hayward decided to meet this demand by raising money to support the larger band. He conjured up a plan to raise the \$15,000 needed. Daniel G. Reid, a director of several large corporations, donated the first \$10,000 (\$250,000 in today's currency). Newly appointed Lieutenant Europe traveled to Puerto Rico in order to get the woodwind players he wanted. He also recruited Francis E. Mikell as the assistant conductor and bandmaster.

With the band challenge solved, the next hurdle for the regiment was the training in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Mayor J. F. Floyd warned military authorities against sending Black troops, but they came along with White soldiers from New York. Predictably, an incident occurred between a hotel manager and a private from Hayward's Regiment. This prompted orders for the regiment to begin plans to travel to France in December, 1917.

### Pershing's Dilemma

John J. Pershing's *nom de guerre*, "Black Jack", came about largely due to the fact that he commanded Black troops, buffalo soldiers of the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment during the Indian Wars of the 1880's. Also, he led mostly dismounted Black combatants of the

10<sup>th</sup> during the Spanish-American War. The regiment also participated in the Philippine Insurrection, early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In addition, some African American soldiers accompanied the 6,600 soldiers who participated in the Mexican Expedition of 1916. Through Pershing's writings and communications, he respected the combat efficiency and bravery of Black soldiers.

General Pershing was faced with a tough decision; what to do with Black soldiers and officers with his A.E.F. in France?

Black activists, leaders, and supporters wanted units of colored men to fight alongside White units. On the other hand, racial prejudices from the American populace, mostly from the South, and military leaders preferred that troops of color be relegated to a labor support role. At most, they wanted segregated fighting units.



General John J. Pershing and General James Harbord.  
(Courtesy NARA)

It appeared to General Pershing that a compromise was needed. "A casual conversation between the A.E.F.'s Chief of Staff, Brigadier General James Harbord, and French officials on January 6, 1918, left Harbord convinced that General Petain will be happy to accept these (colored) regiments." The need for any American soldiers became obvious to all when Germany initiated its breakthrough Operation Kaiserschlacht (Kaiser's battle) in March of 1918. Although Pershing was incredulous about not giving American units piecemeal to his allies, he saw this plea by the French as an opportunity "to appease the Black community's demands for high-status combat assignments without inflaming the passions of White civilians utterly opposed to the idea." Ultimately, the general gave all four regiments of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Negro Infantry Division to the French. The only other Negro Division, the 92<sup>nd</sup>, stayed under the command of Major General Charles Ballou of the A.E.F..

One thing is certain to me, the commander of the A.E.F. was not going to end up like so many of Lincoln's sacked army commanders in the Civil War. Pershing was going to do anything he needed to in order to ensure victory and glorify America's contribution to the war effort. He had almost resigned his army commission after his wife and three daughters died in a fire at the Presidio, San Francisco, in 1915. He decided to stay, and now focused all his energies on his career. The General was not going to end his long combat career with anything less than victory for his American Army in France.

### **The 369<sup>th</sup> in the French Army**

The 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was part of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Negro, "Bluc Helmet" Infantry Division. The division consisted of four infantry regiments with no other support units. As stated earlier, these regiments were amalgamated with the French Army, specifically the 4<sup>th</sup> Army under the command of the highly regarded, wounded General Henri Gouraud. Initially, Hayward's Regiment was assigned to the 16<sup>th</sup> Division of Gouraud's Army. Colonel Hayward told a friend, "Our great American general (Pershing), simply put the Black orphan in a basket, set it on the doorstep of



General Henri Gouraud, commander of the French 4<sup>th</sup> Army. (Courtesy of the Mary Evans Picture Library)

the French, pulled the bell and went away." It should be noted that Hayward lobbied for his regiment to be deployed as a combat regiment from the beginning. Sadly, his unit was on labor assignment for the first four months they were in France.

### **The Linard Letter and more...**

On August 7, 1918, Colonel J.L.A. Linard of A.E.F. Headquarters, penned a "secret" letter to French military and civilian leadership regarding the expectations of communications and decorum required of the "American people" between American Black troops and French military and the civilian populace. He clearly states that "American opinion is unanimous on the 'color question', and does not admit of any discussion." Also, Linard stated that Americans would find it intolerable if the French filled the heads of Negroes with lofty ideals and thoughts of fraternity and equality. He encouraged authorities to post notices to civilians not to fraternize with the Black soldiers and limit communication only to military necessity. This letter penned by the staff colonel had to get the approval of officers of a much higher grade.

The general attitude of the French was to become "passive aggressive". Many of the posts were torn down and reminders of Linard's directive were disregarded. The French army censors noticed that a significant number of Black soldiers did not want to be transferred back to American units if ordered.

Lt. Colonel Paul H. Clark, an American liaison officer assigned to the French General Staff stated, "That having Blacks in your army of occupation that you run some danger. The Black is more animal than we White men and is less likely to observe some of the conventions." Examples of this attitude included,

warnings by some White soldiers in French towns that Black soldiers would “rape their daughters”, and “a handshake from a French woman as an invite to go to bed with her.” The French were stubborn to follow this divisive advice. As one village mayor put it, “Take back these (White) soldiers, and send us some real Americans, Black Americans. . . ,” after a group of rowdy White soldiers disrupted his town.

### Hayward and the Hellfighters in France

It is well documented that the “Hellfighters” or Hollenkampfer as the Germans called them, performed admirably under the command of the French. Given the fact that there were several initial challenges like a communications issue, the soldiers had to use French uniforms, equipment and weapons, and there was also the challenge of replacements. The regiment promoted 42 sergeants to officers in other units, and their replacements lacked sufficient training and experience. Colonel Hayward stated, “The day before the Champagne offensive started, on September 26, 1918, . . . this regiment participated as one of the assaulting units 600 untrained recruits arrived, equipped with gas masks and helmets, but having never worn them.”

Hayward also complained that the A.E.F. HQ never complimented his men nor decorated them like their White counterparts. His officers and men were disappointed. Although General Gouraud asked the A.E.F. permission to cite the men, the only response was a mention of bravery by the two members of the



Medal awards to members of the 369<sup>th</sup> Regiment by French officials. Colonel Hayward is on the extreme left. (Courtesy of “Harlem to the Rhine”, regimental history by Major Arthur Little)

regiment from Pershing in a communique. It was the bravery by privates Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts early in the combat participation of the American Army, that made everyone take notice of these “Men of Bronze.”

### The Aftermath

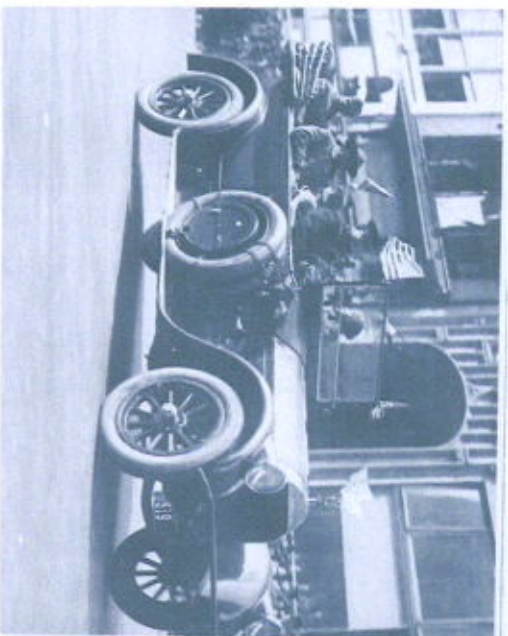
The 369<sup>th</sup> was the first regiment of color to arrive in France, and the first American unit to cross the Rhine River after the Armistice. Regardless of their achievements, they were harassed as they were preparing to disembark at the port of Brest for their return to America. In addition, no Black unit participated in the victory parade along the Arc de Triumphi, not even the heralded Hellfighters.



Sergeant Henry Johnson, wounded hero, rides in the parade for the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment on February 17, 1919. (Courtesy NARA)

After a ticketrape parade up Fifth Avenue in New York City, on February 17, 1919, by the time the Paris Peace Treaty was signed that June, America went back to “normalcy.” The heroes of the “Battle of Henry Johnson”, died tragically. Henry, severely disabled, but without benefits, died in 1929, a destitute and broken man. Needham Roberts and his wife committed suicide in 1947. Most of the rank-and-file soldiers went back to their blue-collar jobs.

President Wilson tried to make the “World Safe for Democracy”, but toward the end of his presidency, the race riots of 1919, called the “Red Summer”, made this idealistic wish hollow, even in his own country.



369<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment parade, a touring car carrying wounded. (Courtesy NARA)

### **The Major Factors That Determined The Success Of The 369<sup>th</sup>**

Colonel Hayward: He was the driving force behind the regiment. He supported, advocated, and provided the leadership the new unit needed. His leadership and example created a positive environment for both White and Black officers. That infectious attitude filtered down to the privates. White officers like Major Arthur Little and Captain Hamilton Fish, III, for example, followed Hayward's example. Black officers like Captains Marshall and Fillmore, and Lieutenants Europe, Reed, and Lacey were respected for their experience, intelligence, and leadership.

Also, from the beginning, the colonel promoted his regiment as a combat unit, and he supported the idea of having the biggest and best band. The band: Due to the leadership of Hayward and Europe, the band became the talk of France. Talent like Noble Sissie and Francis Mikkell, and the sheer size of the band, made it a sensation wherever they played. The unique sound of jazz helped sooth the weary soul of the French people. Jazz infected the French culture after the war. Also, it promoted a great sense of confidence in the men of the regiment.

The "Battle of Henry Johnson": Early into the regiment's amalgamation with the French Army, Privates Johnson and Roberts defended their position

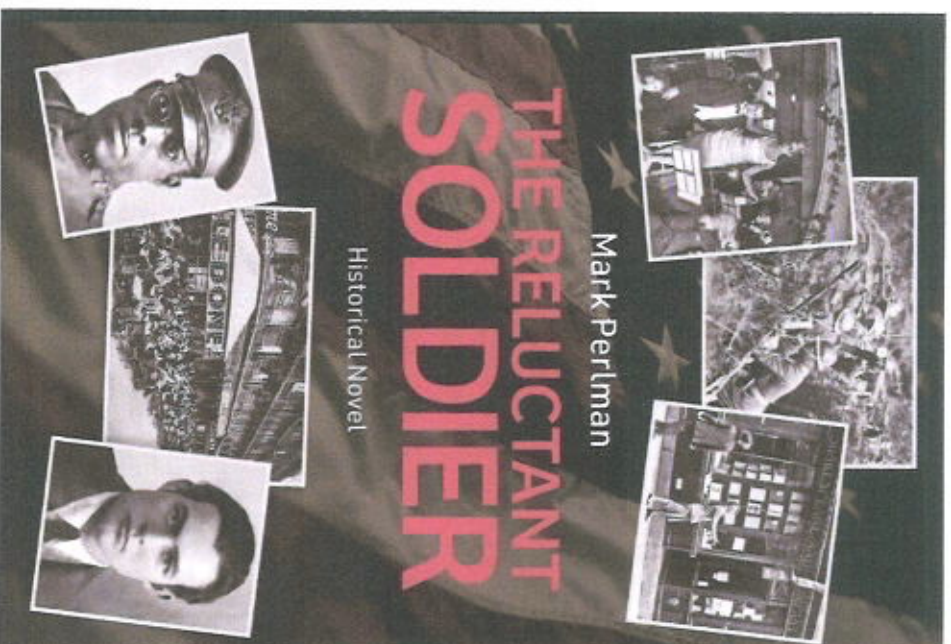
against a trench raid by the Germans. Greatly outnumbered, they held off the attack, killing and wounding many intruders. It was estimated that the two fought off ten times their number. Both men suffered grievous wounds. Publicity of their deeds traveled across France and America. Both countries were eager to exploit this heroism to their mutual advantage. In addition to the notoriety of the band, this combat success gave a shot in the arm to the confidence of the regiment. It took almost a century before Henry Johnson was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor by President Obama in 2012.

The French Army: Another major factor in the performance of the regiment was due to their incorporation with the French Army. This was largely true for all four regiments of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Division that were assigned to the French. The challenge with language was trumped by the respect and comradery shown by the Hellfighters' mentors. The French were eager to pay tribute to their new arrivals.

Demographic and social factors: The success of the 369<sup>th</sup> as well as the other three regiments that comprised the 93<sup>rd</sup> Division was, in part, due to the background and experiences of the soldiers and officers. In general, many members of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Division, especially the 369<sup>th</sup> and 370<sup>th</sup> Regiments, came from urban areas like New York and Chicago. Living in urban communities, these volunteers and recruits had established business, social, family, and fraternal support networks. Also, there was a more favorable political and civil infrastructure that assisted the soldiers in the Northern urban communities. Their heightened self-esteem and confidence proved to be higher than their counterparts of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Division, who largely came from rural areas. Both the 369<sup>th</sup> and 370<sup>th</sup> Regiments were National Guards units with an organizational and training culture more mature than the other units. In fact, the 370<sup>th</sup> was the only Black Infantry Regiment commanded by virtually all-Black officers. In addition, most of the Black officers of the four regiments that fought with the French had more training and command experience. Their relationships with their NCOs and soldiers were more harmonious and effective than with their counterparts who fought with the American Army.

General James Harbord stated, "The 93<sup>rd</sup> served with credit to the end of the war." While Second Army Commander, General Robert Bullard had the opposite impression of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Division that reported to his army, "It's (92<sup>nd</sup>) soldiers were 'hopelessly inferior' and admitted it, an attitude that showed they had no pride or motivation." He concluded that the division's ineptness was as much the fault of its General Ballou as of the Negroes." As a result of their performance in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, Bullard took the whole division out of the line and sent them home early.

As stated in this article, there were many reasons for the combat success and overall quality of performance by the 369<sup>th</sup> regiment. In no order of importance, I will list the following factors: the leadership and experience of White and Black officers beginning with Colonel William Hayward, the fraternity and empathy between the White and Black officers, the combat leadership of all the officers, the fraternity and support of the French Army, the civilian social and support systems of the officers and soldiers, the initial combat successes like the "Battle of Henry Johnson", and the experience, quality, size and notoriety of the regiment's band. All of these factors combined, led to the legacy and legend of the "Harlem Hellfighters" Regiment.



### About the Author



Mark Perlman lives in Fairfield, Connecticut and is a graduate of Northeastern University (BA, MBA). His research interests include the experiences of African-Americans in the military,

World War One, the Interwar years in Paris, Jazz, African-American repatriation in Paris, World War Two, the French Resistance and the post-war years. This research is the basis of his novel *The Reluctant Soldier (Le Soldat Involontaire)*, a multifaceted tale of war, romance, political turmoil, murder, and the bohemian life in Paris between the wars. The book can be purchased on Amazon or on my website: [thereluctantsoldier.com](http://thereluctantsoldier.com) in English or French. "History that entertains."

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