

Why Black Men Fought in World War I, 1919

Introduction

During World War I, approximately 370,000 black men in the US military served in segregated regiments and were often relegated to support duties such as digging trenches, transporting supplies, cleaning latrines, and burying the dead. One notable exception is the “Harlem Hellfighters,” organized in 1916 as the 15th Infantry Regiment of the New York National Guard. Their nickname came from the 200 Harlem residents that comprised the core of the regiment, and the German view of them as “Hellfighters.”

On April 6, 1917, the same day that the United States declared war on Germany, the 15th New York Regiment was federalized and became a part of the US Army. In May 1918, it was redesignated the 369th Infantry Regiment. They joined the 93rd Division and were “loaned” to the French army, becoming the only American division to serve exclusively under the French. The men spent 191 days in combat, more than any other American unit. Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts became the first two Americans to be awarded the French Croix de Guerre. In 1996 they were awarded the Purple Heart and in 2002 received the Distinguished Service Cross.

In 1919, the soldiers returned to the United States and were treated initially as heroes. In the wake of the war, however, there was a surge in racial violence. According to the historian Chad L. Williams, “race riots erupted in several cities, the most significant occurring in Washington, DC, and Chicago. In October 1919, whites in Elaine, Arkansas, massacred hundreds of black people in response to the efforts of sharecroppers to organize themselves. In the South, the number of reported lynchings swelled from sixty-four in 1918 to eighty-three in 1919. At least eleven of these victims were returned soldiers. For African Americans, the end of the war brought anything but peace.”¹

It was in this environment that five members of the Harlem Hellfighters compiled the *Complete History of the Colored Soldiers in the World War*, documenting their service and emphasizing the accomplishments of black soldiers. They conclude the book with one officer’s explanation of why he chose to join the army and fight despite the racism that people of color were experiencing in the US.

Excerpt

From “How Negro Officer Felt about Fighting,” *Complete History of the Colored Soldiers in the World War: Authentic Story of the Greatest War of Civilized Times and What the Colored Man Did to Uphold Democracy and Liberty* (Bennett & Churchill, New York, 1919), p. 157:

“One of my men came to me several days ago,” [an officer] said, “and asked me why I had joined the army. He reminded me that I was above draft age and he wanted me to tell him what I was fighting for. I told him I was fighting for what the flag meant to the Negroes in the United States. I told him I was fighting because I wanted other oppressed people to know the meaning of democracy and enjoy it. I told him that millions of

¹ Chad L. Williams, “[African Americans in World War I](http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-world-war-i.html),” *Africana Age: African & African Diasporan Transformations in the 20th Century*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-world-war-i.html>.

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Americans fought for four years for us Negroes to get it and now it was only right that we should fight for all we were worth to help other people get the same thing.

“We are supposed to have had equal rights for fifty years now, but many times we have thought that those rights have been denied us, and many times it has been held that we have never done anything to deserve them.

“I told him that now is our opportunity to prove what we can do. If we can’t fight and die in this war just as bravely as white men, then we don’t deserve an equality with white men, and after the war we had better go back home and forget about it all. But if we can do things on the front; if we can make ourselves felt; if we can make America really proud of the Ole—th, then I am sure it will be the biggest possible step toward our equalization as citizens. That is what I told him, and I think he understood me. The whole (censored) has the same spirit.”

And so the strife for distinction has been inculcated to the ranks of the Old (censored). The men are looking forward to being known as the “Black Devils,” the same as the Chasseurs have earned the right to the “Blue Devil” nickname.

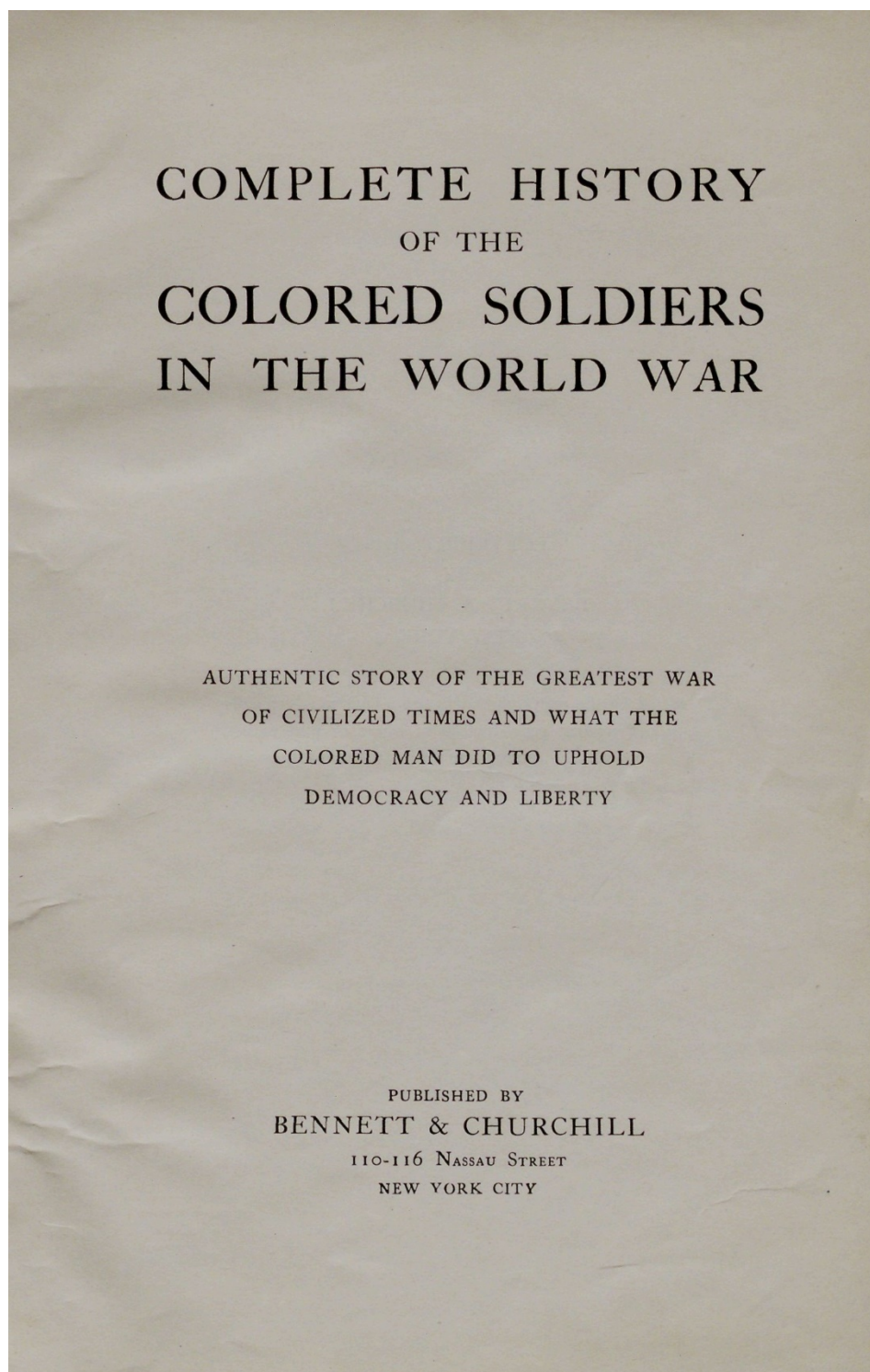
These Negro officers and men have tasted a new equality since arriving in France. In the village square of a small hamlet serving as headquarters I saw them mingling on the easiest terms with the most cultivated French officers. And as officers they carry out their bearing in their personal appearance. Among no American officers in France now, even the nattiest, whose habitat is at G. H. Q., far from the dust and mud of the camps, have I seen more highly polished shoes and leathers or better pressed uniforms. Pride in the wearing of clothes is something which these Negro officers did not have to learn from orders.

Questions for Discussion

1. In his speech asking for a declaration of war against Germany, President Woodrow Wilson stressed that the “world must be made safe for democracy.” What evidence from the text indicates that the author agrees with the President?
2. According to the author, what did the American flag represent to black Americans?
3. Why did the author feel that it was so important for black men to fight in the war? What did they stand to lose if they didn’t fight?
4. Contrary to what black soldiers had believed and hoped for, their willingness to die for their country and their acts of heroism and patriotism were not enough to achieve equality. In your opinion, in the event of the outbreak of another military conflict, would the author once again encourage black men fight again? Explain. Cite textual evidence to support your answer.

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Image



J. A. Jamieson, et al *Complete History of the Colored Soldiers in the World War*, New York: Bennett & Churchill, 1919. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC06129, title page)

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FOREWORD

We, the undersigned, "Colored Boys" who have been over seas with both the Ninety-Second, and Ninety-Third Division, and have seen and were in some of the fiercest battles that were fought in France, made up our minds while in the thick of battle that our people throughout the country should have a true history of what our boys have done right from we men who went through every part of the war. A great many of the histories today contain only official reports. Of course in a book of that kind you do not learn of the hardships, and privations, nor how the men fought individually, that Prussianism and uncivilized tactics might be wiped out forever.

In this history you will find our individual stories, regimental histories, and pictures taken right on the field of battle. In short, this book tells you only about the colored people's part in the world war.

The contents of this book are absolutely true.

SERGT. J. A. JAMIESON
SERGT. G. I. WILLIAMS
CORPL. H. WHITE
PRIV. JACK ALLEN
PRIV. JOHN GRAHAM

J. A. Jamieson, et al *Complete History of the Colored Soldiers in the World War*, New York, 1919.
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06129, Foreword)

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"HOW NEGRO OFFICER FELT ABOUT FIGHTING"

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These Negro officers and men have tasted a new equality since arriving in France. In the village square of a small hamlet serving as headquarters I saw them mingling on the easiest terms with the most cultivated French officers. And as officers they carry out their bearing in their personal appearance. Among no American officers in France now, even the nattiest, whose habitat is at G. H. Q., far from the dust and mud of the camps, have I seen more highly polished shoes and leathers or better pressed uniforms. Pride in the wearing of clothes is something which these Negro officers did not have to learn from orders.

SELF-SEGREGATION NOT PATRIOTIC

There have been many colored men during this world war who have done an unpatriotic thing—an un-American thing. They have

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asked that their race be segregated, that their race be denied a place in the melting pot of all other races beneath the Stars and Stripes. While the hyphen has been buried with the oblivion of a divided allegiance; while the patriotic statesmen of this Republic have been thundering from Washington to the Golden Gates of California, from Maine to Oregon, for a fusing of all the peoples of the land into one American race, we find many pigmy black men seeking to have their race set apart in all the efforts for the common good. Selfishly for the most part they have sought for segregated camps, for segregated Y. M. C. A. huts, for segregated canteens and now for segregated Knights of Columbus huts. Either for themselves or some of their friends, like the black purblind leaders who ask for separate public schools in the Northern States, they have been looking for jobs.

The caste influence of segregation upon their race in the sight of all the foreign races being welcomed into the white American body politic, has made no appeal to them. The sure degradation of separate accommodations into inferior accommodations with the lapse of time has either not occurred to them or concerned them so long as they could get the jobs now. The unpatriotic thing which they do in striving to perpetuate race and caste lines in this Republic when it with liberty loving peoples the world over are fighting for Democracy and against caste and race barriers, has not penetrated the thick skulls of many of these blatant ignoramuses and demagogues. Unlike the other peoples of the world they have sought through hypocrisy and curish fawning at the feet of those in power, through base treachery to the cause of their own race advancement to postpone for their own people the thing for which they have been fighting and dying for others. But not all of the black men who have been seeking segregation for their race have been of the bread and butter brigade. Through their admiration for these leaders, a host of unthinking others have been misled. The efforts of both have been equally ruinous if not fatal to a square deal of democracy for their people when the deal is made at the peace table and the years thereafter. Both have gone up and down the country asking for "a Negro this" and "a Negro that" until white statesmen are beginning to believe that the race feels itself inferior and unworthy, that the race prefers to be jim crowed even in this crisis and even in the free States of this Republic. Many Caucasian bigots have added their dirty work to the slavish seeking of these black worthies. Together they have manufactured a self-segregation propaganda among colored people which is as dangerous to Democracy in the final analysis as the hyphen of the Hun. There can no more be a Negro nation within the nation, in this Republic if it is to endure, than there can be a Hun nation within the nation. There can be colored Americans,

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there can be white Americans. But they must all be Americans and nothing else.

These are indeed the days of small men. What separate camps what separate Christian Associations, what separate Catholic canteens would Fred Douglass, John Mercer Langston, Blanche K. Bruce and James C. Price be asking for in this world crisis if they were alive today? What chains of slavery would the race still not wear had they not in those other days of chaos and confusion stood for the truth, the further freedom and equality of their people. On every hand we hear from leading white war workers that the colored men going forth for Democracy prefer to be jim crowed. How putrid is their patriotism, how hypocritical is their Christianity in promulgating such treachery. The truth is THE RACE DOES NOT WISH ANY MORE THAN IT DESERVES DISTINCT AND DIFFERENT treatment in this, their native land. We say to every patriot in this country: SEGREGATION IS WRONG. IT IS DANGEROUS. IT HURTS BOTH RACES—today and for all time to come. THIS GREAT WORLD WAR WILL HAVE BEEN FOUGHT IN VAIN FOR AMERICA IF IT DOES NOT BRING BLACK AMERICA AND WHITE AMERICA CLOSER TOGETHER RATHER THAN SEND THEM FURTHER APART. We ask the Commander and Chief of the Army and Navy to abolish every caste and color line among the forces of our common Uncle Sam. We ask the Director of the Railroads of the nation to abolish the hideous jim crow cars of the South as a matter of economy and of winning the war. We ask the American people to kill the monster of segregation gnawing at the vitals of the nation. WE ARE FIGHTING TODAY FOR AND AS ONE AMERICAN PEOPLE, ONE AND INSEPARABLE, NOW AND FOREVER!

J. A. Jamieson, *Complete History of the Colored Soldiers in the World War*, New York, 1919.
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06129, p. 159)