

CURRENT HISTORY

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The Negro in the War

How American Black Troops Performed Deeds of Valor on Many Battlefields



AMONG the factors which aided the allied and associated nations, including the United States of America, to fight their way to victory in the great war were the efficient services rendered by the dark-skinned Hindus from Britain's furthest dominions and the negro colonials of France—her Algerians, her Senegalese, and her Moroccans—whose fearlessness was demonstrated repeatedly on the battlefield—"black devils," the German soldiers called them, when, fighting like demons, they had forced the Kaiser's proudest shock troops to retreat before them. And America sent 80,000 negro citizens to do their part for the world's liberty. What they did was made manifest by citation after citation, the conferring by the French Government of many War Crosses, and the granting of many United States medals for distinguished bravery.

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THE COLORED AMERICANS

The negro soldiers of the United States arrived late on the field of battle, but in more than sufficient time to make Germany feel the strength of their arm. In all 83,600 negroes were drafted for service in the National Army sent overseas. More than 626 of the 1,250 colored men who completed their course of training were commissioned as officers in the United States Army; nearly 100 negro physicians and surgeons received commissions as officers in the Medical Reserve Corps, and a full fighting force of 30,000 men constituted the 92d Division detailed for duty in France under General Pershing. The total number of negro combat troops was 42,000.

Like the Senegalese forces of the French Army, the black American troops held their own on European battlefields and stood the test of courage, endurance and aggressiveness in moments of the greatest stress. They fought valiantly at Château-Thierry, Soissons, on the Vesle, in Champagne, in the Argonne, and in the final attacks in the Metz region. The entire first battalion of the 367th Infantry, the "Buffaloes," as it was called, was awarded the Croix de Guerre for heroism in the drive on Metz. The soldiers of this battalion received their baptism of fire in this attack; at the start they won honors which veterans of many conflicts had failed to capture. In other engagements three black regiments as units were awarded the Croix de Guerre, which bestows on each man the right to wear the coveted badge. When the fighting stopped, it was the negro troops who were nearest to the Rhine. Whether performing individual exploits, fighting in a single regiment, or doing battle in a division made up entirely of men of his organization the negro soldier rose to every test.

In the Argonne the 368th Infantry, colored, sent a volunteer runner with a message to the left flank of an American firing line. The way led across an open field swept by heavy enemy machine-gun fire. Before he had gone far, a shell cut him down. As he fell he shouted back to his comrades that someone should come and get the message. Another member of the regiment, Lieutenant Campbell, dashed across the shell-swept space, picked up the wounded private, and, amid a hail of German bullets, carried his man back to the American lines, winning by this achievement the Distinguished Service Cross and the promotion to a Captaincy. Under the same Lieutenant Campbell a few black soldiers, armed only with their rifles, trench knives, and hand grenades, moving over a road in the Château-Thierry sector, by a clever ruse and great bravery, captured a concealed machine-gun that had been doing deadly work, killed four of the Germans operating it, and made prisoners of the other three.

DEEDS OF 372D REGIMENT

Four of the negro regiments first sent over, the 369th, 370th, 371st, and 372d, afterward organized into the Provisional 93d Division, were brigaded separately with French troops. The fighting record of the 372d may be taken as typical. The men had arrived in France on April 14, and had gone into training with the French on April 28. On June 6 the 372d was sent to the trenches just west of Verdun, and occupied the famous battle-swept Hill 304 and sections at Four de Paris and Vauquois. On Hill 304 thousands of French and German soldiers had fallen as the battleline swung back and forth. This hill was given to the negroes to hold, and they held it.

In the Champagne sector, with Montoir as the objective, the negroes cheered and sang when the announcement that they were going into battle was made. From June 6 to Sept. 10, in the bloody Argonne Forest, the 372d bore the brunt of the terrific battle for weeks. They took an active part in the Argonne offensive, which lasted from Sept. 26 to Oct. 7. In the ordeal of this gigantic drive, the negro troops proved their fighting qualities in deadly striking power and stubborn resistance in moments of crisis, and made for themselves such a record that they won as a unit the coveted Croix de Guerre. The casualty list showed 500

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men killed, wounded, and gassed.

Another regiment's record, that of the 369th, commanded by Colonel William Hayward, ex-Public Service Commissioner, is equally striking. The 369th was in the Champagne offensive as a part of the Fourth Army, commanded by General Gouraud, a few miles west of the Argonne Forest. The accomplishment of this regiment was described by Colonel Hayward in the opening lines of his official report:

At 5:25 A. M. the assault was launched, an assault that kept assaulting so far as our division was concerned, for twelve days, in which we crossed rivers, captured towns, cut and climbed through acres and acres of barbed wire entanglements, stormed bluffs, ridges and hills for fourteen kilometers, all the way facing stubborn and terribly effective artillery and machine-gun fire. At the end of twelve days we came out with our division, what was left of us, which included twenty officers.

At the very end of the war the 369th won another distinction, pointed out by *The Stars and Stripes*, the organ of the American troops in France, in the following announcement:

The furthest north at 11 o'clock [when the armistice went into effect, Nov. 11, 1918] on the front of the two armies was held at the extreme American left, up Sedan way, by the troops of the 77th Division. The furthest east—the nearest to the Rhine—was held by those negro soldiers who used to make up the old New York 15th, and who have long been brigaded with the French. They were in Alsace, and their line ran through Thann and across the railway that leads to Colmar.

NEGRO DIVISION IN ACTION

Soon after the 92d Division was thoroughly organized it took over the Marbache sector. The fury of these men's trench raids won from the Germans the sobriquet of "schwarze Teufel," (black devils.) By these raids they drove the Germans north beyond Erehaut and Voivrotte to Cheminot Bridge. To check these attacks the Germans tried to destroy the bridge, and flooded the country. Up to that time, it should be remembered, the 92d Division as a unit had never been in battle. Only the 368th Infantry had received the baptism of fire in the Argonne Forest.

The division's chance came in the drive on Metz. At 4 o'clock one Sunday morning (Nov. 10, 1918) they were notified that they were to be sent into action. Through the whole division echoed the fighting slogan of the "Buffaloes," the 367th Infantry: "See it through!"

The 92d began its advance at 7 o'clock from Pont-à-Mousson. Facing it was a valley commanded by the heavy guns of Metz, and by nests of German machine guns. The negro troops realized their first great opportunity. Fused by a species of race solidarity they plunged forward like a single man, swiftly, unflinchingly, through a veritable rain of shell-fire, heedless of their losses. Their objective for the day was Bois Fréhaut. Picked Moroccan and Senegalese troops of the French Army, striking for the same point, in an odd competition of black races on this day, were the first to arrive. The Germans, grasping the situation, pounded Bois Fréhaut with a heavy fire, and the Senegalese and Moroccans were finally compelled to retreat.

Of the American negro troops, the 56th Regiment was forced to withdraw, but not until after heavy loss. It was the 1st Battalion of the "Buffaloes," commanded by Major Charles L. Appleton of New York, with negro company commanders and Lieutenants, that was called upon to hold the Germans at bay while the decimated 56th retreated. The iron resistance which the Buffaloes made to the Germans on this occasion, in the face of a terrific fire, won for the battalion the *Croix de Guerre*. A little later Bois Fréhaut was taken by the 92d. The murderous fire directed against the swiftly advancing blacks could not deter them. *The Stars and Stripes* said of this fight:

Probably the hardest fighting done by any Americans in the final hour was that which engaged the troops of the 28th, 92d, 81st, and 7th Divisions of the Second American Army, who launched a fire-eating attack above Vigneulles just at dawn on the 11th. It was no mild thing, that last flare of battle, and the order to cease firing did not reach the men in the front line until the last moment, when the

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runners sped with it from fox hole to fox hole.

Numerous officers and privates of the 92d were commended for meritorious conduct by General Orders. At the close of hostilities the negro division held the line Vandières-St. Michel-Xon-Norry. The 92d suffered a total of 1,478 casualties.

So the negro soldier, alike of Africa and of the United States, played his part in the great war. Along the north-east front, in Rheims, on the Marne, at Mont de Choisy, in the Argonne, before Metz, these troops held their ground or broke the enemy lines by their unconquerable tenacity. As a French writer put it, "they fought like demons, and they died like men."

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