

The Argonne Forest  
Site of African American Hallowed Ground

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The Argonne Forest, in Northeastern France, is famous for the routing of the World War I German offensive of 1918. To the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry, an all-African American regiment from New York City, however, this is where they made history. The Argonne Forest is hallowed ground for African Americans because this is where they proved to America and the world that they could fight and that they were strong.

In 1918, the 369<sup>th</sup> infantry, or the Harlem Hellfighters as they were known, was sent to fight in the Argonne Forest alongside French allies. The American army was segregated at the time, but the 369<sup>th</sup> fought on, even though they faced racism. They lost about 1,500 men throughout the war, receiving only 900 replacements. During the Battle of the Argonne Forest, the 369<sup>th</sup> infantry division ripped their way through the German defenses ruthlessly, becoming one of the first units to reach the Rhine. In 191 days of fighting tooth and nail, they never lost a trench or had even one of their men captured. In fact, over 100 soldiers from this regiment received medals for bravery from the French or Americans.

An outstanding example of the 369<sup>th</sup> fighting spirit was Henry Johnson, one of the first American to ever be awarded the Croix du Guerre Avec Palme, the highest French award for valor. Henry Johnson was on guard duty with a fellow soldier when they were attacked by a group of 12 to 20 German soldiers. His friend was shot, so Johnson told him to hand him grenades. After running out of grenades, Johnson fired until his gun jammed, at which point the Germans charged and overran his position. He fought the Germans off in hand-to-hand combat using his gun like a bludgeon until he took a blow to the head. As the Germans were about to take his friend prisoner, Johnson got up and charged them with only his Bolo knife. Johnson prevented the Germans from taking his friend prisoner; he killed or wounded over a dozen enemy soldiers, and he himself was wounded 21 times in the process. He was given the

nickname “Black Death” by the American public. For these actions, he was awarded the Croix de Guerre Avec Palme while the entire French division applauded. It was not until over 60 years after his death that he was awarded the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross.

In the Argonne Forest, far away from home, the men of the 369<sup>th</sup> were not just fighting the Germans. They were fighting for freedom, freedom from the racist belief that they could not fight, that they were not strong. It would be another 30 years before the U.S. Army would be desegregated. In the Argonne Forest, the 369<sup>th</sup> proved that African Americans could be strong, effective, and brave soldiers.