

Handout 1: African Americans in World War I

- During World War I, the United States military was segregated by race. 367,710 African Americans were drafted and served in four segregated units commanded by white officers: 24th and 25th Infantry and the 9th and 10th Cavalry. The vast majority of African Americans were in Army Services of Supplies (SOS) units and labor battalions instead of direct combat. Few African Americans served in the Navy and none in the Marines.
- There were two African American combat divisions – the 92nd and 93rd. 40,000 African American soldiers were in combat. The 93rd Division included the 369th Regiment, under which Horace Pippin served. The casualty rate for the 93rd Division was 35%.
- The 93rd Division was created from the African American National Guard primarily the 8th Illinois and the 15th New York. The 369th Regiment was from the 15th New York National Guard. They were sent to France without training in the United States and served under French commanders. The Germans called them the “Hell Fighters” and the French referred to them as the “Enfants Perdus” (“Lost children” because they were discriminated against by white Americans.)



Horace Pippin's regiment, the 369th Regiment (also called “Hell Fighters” by the Germans) was one of the few black regiments that fought actively in WW I.
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- U.S. General John Pershing's general headquarters in France issued “Secret Information Concerning Black Americans Troops” which was given to the French army and local French civilian leaders. The communiqué included: “Although a citizen of the United States, the black man is regarded by the white American as an inferior being with whom relations of business or service only are possible.” Pershing's order stated: “The vices of the Negro are a constant menace to the American who has to repress them sternly...We must not eat with them, must not shake hands or seek to talk or meet with them outside the requirements of military service. We must not commend too highly the black American troops, particularly in the presence of (white) Americans.” Pershing also warned against “spoiling” African Americans or close contact between African American men and white women.
- The 369th Infantry Regiment was on the front lines for more than six months – longer than any other U.S. unit. 171 African Americans were awarded the French Legion of Merit from France, yet no African American received the Congressional Medal of Honor from the United States.
- Most African American regiments included a band. These bands introduced jazz and ragtime to France and became very popular. The most famous band was from the 369th Infantry led by James Reese Europe.
- When the 15th New York Regiment left for Europe in June 1917, New York Governor Whitman would not let them participate in a New York City parade. When the 369th returned in February 1919, they marched up 5th Ave. into Harlem while over one million people watched.

- After the war, there were numerous race riots based on white racism and competition for jobs. During the “Red Summer” of 1919, there were more than 24 riots in U.S. cities. At least 78 African Americans were lynched including 11 soldiers.
- July 25-28, 1918, a race riot occurred in Chester, Pennsylvania. Three African Americans and two white people were killed. On July 26 – 29, a race riot occurred in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Three African Americans and one white person were killed in this riot, and 60 other people were injured.