

## BLACK HISTORY MONTH: 2 Stories of Overcoming Adversity

### Madame C. J. Walker (1867-1919)

Source: <https://madamcjwalker.com/books> and <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/madame-c-j-walker>

The daughter of formerly enslaved parents, Madam C. J. Walker was orphaned at seven, married at fourteen and widowed at twenty. She spent the better part of the next two decades laboring as a washerwoman for \$1.50 a week. Then -- with the discovery of a revolutionary hair care formula for black women -- everything changed. By her death in 1919, Walker managed to overcome astonishing odds: building a storied beauty empire from the ground up, amassing wealth unprecedented among black women and devoting her life to philanthropy and social activism. Along the way, she formed friendships with great early-twentieth-century political figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington.

Madam C. J. Walker was “the first Black woman millionaire in America” and made her fortune thanks to her homemade line of hair care products for Black women. Born Sarah Breedlove to parents who had been enslaved, she was inspired to create her hair products after an experience with hair loss, which led to the creation of the “Walker system” of hair care. A talented entrepreneur with a knack for self-promotion, Walker built a business empire, at first selling products directly to Black women, then employing “beauty culturalists” to hand-sell her wares. The self-made millionaire used her fortune to fund scholarships for women at the Tuskegee Institute and donated large parts of her wealth to the NAACP, the Black YMCA and other charities.

**Author’s Note:** In preparing for the centennial of Madam C. J. Walker’s death on May 25 1919 a few years ago, some said that that her legacy is more robust than ever. Her 2001 biography “On Her Own Ground,” written by her great-great-granddaughter, A’Lelia Bundles, premiered on Netflix in March 2020. It is no accident that her legacy lives on. It wasn’t just about building a business; it was about empowering women, educating women, helping them to become economically independent, and generations of people benefited from her legacy of empowering not just black women but women everywhere. Her generous donations to various causes such as the building fund for the Indianapolis black YMCA and the national fight against lynching made her legacy even more noteworthy.

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## The Harlem Hellfighters – 369th Infantry Regiment

Sources: Excerpts from Erick Trickey's May 14, 2018 article in *Smithsonian Magazine*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/one-hundred-years-ago-harlem-hellfighters-bravely-led-us-wwi-180968977/>, and from Edward Mikkelsen Jr.'s January 17, 2007 piece for *Black Past*, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/369th-infantry-regiment-harlem-hellfighters/>

The Hellfighters, the most celebrated African American regiment in World War I, confronted racism even as they trained for war, helped bring jazz to France, then battled Germany longer than almost any other American doughboys. (Their nickname's origin is unclear: it was possibly coined by enemy soldiers, the American press, or both.) Like their predecessors in the Civil War and successors in the wars that followed, these African American troops fought a war for a country that refused them basic rights – and their bravery stood as a rebuke to racism, a moral claim to first-class citizenship.

They were mostly New Yorkers, the first black troops in their state's National Guard. After years of lobbying by civic leaders from Harlem, Manhattan's celebrated black neighborhood, Governor Charles Whitman finally formed the all-black unit, first known as the 15th New York National Guard Regiment, in 1916, as the U.S. prepared for possible entry into World War I.

The majority of the enlistees actually came from Harlem, which was home to 50,000 of Manhattan's 60,000 African Americans in the 1910s. Others came from Brooklyn, towns up the Hudson River, and New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania. Some were teens, some in their mid-40s. Some were porters, doormen, or elevator operators, some teachers, night watchmen or mailmen. Their motives included adventure, patriotism and pride. "To be somebody you had to belong to the 15th Infantry," wrote enlistee Arthur P. Davis of Harlem.

Renamed the U.S. 369th Infantry Regiment, they were assigned to the U.S. Army's Services of Supply, unloading ships and cleaning latrines, a typical assignment for African American soldiers at the time. But General John Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe, soon offered the 369th to the French army to solve a political problem. The French and British were demanding American reinforcements for their badly depleted divisions. Pershing, under orders from President Woodrow Wilson, had insisted on forming an independent American force in France, to preserve troop morale and accountability for American casualties and to strengthen Wilson's clout in eventual peace talks.

Yet Pershing made an exception for the black soldiers of the 369th, reassigning them to the French on March 10. (Pershing's attitudes toward black troops were complicated; he served with the all-black 10th Cavalry in 1895, from whence he got his nickname "Black Jack," but wrote in his 1931 memoir that black soldiers needed more training because of "lower capacity and lack of education.") Hayward, who had lobbied Pershing to let his troops fight, captured the ironies of the general's decision in a letter. "A fairy tale has materialized," wrote Hayward. "We are now a combat unit.... Our great American general simply put the black orphan in a basket, set it on the doorstep of the French, pulled the bell, and went away.

After three weeks' training by French troops, the 369th entered the combat trenches on April 15, 1918 – more than a month before the American Expeditionary Forces' first major battle. For three months, as the German spring offensive raged dozens of miles to the northwest, the 369th manned the front line and fought occasional skirmishes, including Johnson and Roberts' battle against the German raiding party.

Spending over six months in combat, perhaps the longest of any American unit in the war, the 369th suffered approximately fifteen hundred casualties but received only nine hundred replacements. Unit histories claimed they were the first unit to cross the Rhine into Germany; they performed well at Chateau-Thierry and Belleau Wood, earning the epithet "Hell Fighters" from their enemies. Nevertheless, the poor replacement system coupled with no respite from the line took its toll, leaving the unit exhausted by the armistice in November.

Histories of the regiment say the troops spent 191 days on the front, more than any other Americans. On February 17, 1919, a massive crowd filled Fifth Avenue for a victory parade honoring the Hellfighters.

**Author's Postscript:** Despite having performed admirably during combat, with well over one hundred members of the regiment receiving American and/or French medals, including the first two Americans – Corporal Henry Johnson and Private Needham Roberts – to be awarded the coveted French *Croix de Guerre*, they returned to life as usual in America. In one instance, that of Henry Johnson, while he fought bravely and received medals honoring that patriotic effort, he could not speak his truth back home nor receive the medical treatment he needed. After giving a fiery speech in St. Louis in March 1919 in which he accused white soldiers of racism and cowardice, he disappeared from the public sphere. Later, he was admitted to the Army's Walter Reed Hospital in 1920, diagnosed with tuberculosis, and died in July 1929, at age 39, of an enlarged heart. In 2015, ninety-seven years after Johnson's battle in France, President Obama awarded him a posthumous Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award,

stating: "America can't change what happened to Henry Johnson, but we can do our best to make it right".

**Compiled & submitted by: RRSJM Member Bill Kiley**