



Searching for Homer Lawson: African American World War I Combat Troops Lesson by Paul LaRue

Objective: Introduce students to the role and contributions of African American World War I Soldiers

Grade Levels: Middle or High School

Content Area: Social Studies

Time Allotment: 1 class period

Connections to Ohio Model Curriculum Social Studies:
High School American History Content Statements: 1, 2, 4, 15, 17

Skills: analyze artifacts (photographs), close reading, cause and effect of historical events

Vocabulary: 93rd Division, 369 and 372 Regiments, Croix de Guerre Colonial Troops, The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars

Teacher Tip: This lesson could be used for Veterans Day, Black History Month or as a Blizzard Bag assignment.

Steps in Strategy:

- 1.) Have your students view photograph #1 below
 - a.) Ask students: What is this building? Who is Homer Lawson?
 - b.) Could be done as a short writing prompt or as a class discussion
- 2.) Have students complete Reading #1 and Photograph #2 including Homer Lawson information
- 3.) Have students complete short quiz below (could be done as a class)
- 4.) Wrap-up: Discuss why Homer Lawson's name is on Post #653
- 5.) Extension Activity or extended reading: Have students read "Yankee Negroes in Horizon Blue led way to Rhine" See below.



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Evaluation: Student Questions and Answers

1.) Why were African American Soldiers sent to serve with the French Army?

Answer: French needed manpower and French use of Colonial Troops

2.) Why did the 369th become famous?

Answer: First African American troops from the 93rd Division to arrive in France, long period of combat, and demonstrated bravery

3.) What decoration did the 369th and 372nd receive from the French?

Answer: Croix de Guerre (both as regiments and individual soldiers)

4.) In what campaign was Homer Lawson killed in action?

Answer: Meuse-Argonne Campaign

5.) Why did Sgt. Henry Johnson receive the Croix de Guerre in 1918, yet does not receive the Medal of Honor until nearly 100 years later?

Answer: Institutional racism

Research topics for a student, or the entire class:

1.) Sergeant Henry Johnson and Corporal Freddie Stowers

2.) 369th Infantry, "Harlem Hell Fighters"

3.) Croix de Guerre

4.) African American WWI troops and the French Army

5.) African American World War I Soldiers from your community

6.) Local American Legion and/or Veterans of Foreign Wars in your community: Who is the Post named for? Why? Connection to WWI?



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Photograph #1

Location: Washington Court House, Ohio (2015)



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Reading #1

The Civil War ends with more than 200,000 African American soldiers and sailors serving in the Union war effort. The post war army was much smaller. African Americans made up four regiments: the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 25th and 26th Infantry. These soldiers served with distinction in the Western Campaigns, Spanish American War and the Philippine Insurrection. The 9th and 10th Cavalry "Buffalo Soldiers" are the best known of the post-Civil War African American Soldiers.

With the outbreak of war in Europe, the United States Army began planning, including the role of African American soldiers. In late 1917 the 92nd and 93rd Divisions (African American) were organized. General John Pershing's goal was to keep all American forces under American command. Due to the devastating losses suffered by the French, the 93rd Division was sent to serve with the French Army. The French Army had a tradition of using colonial troops from Algeria, Morocco and Senegal. The 93rd Division was made up four regiments: 369, 370, 371 and 372. The majority of men in the 93rd Division were from African American National Guard units from New York, Illinois, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Ohio, Tennessee and the District of Columbia.

The 369 was the first regiment from the 93rd Division to arrive in France in December 1917. The 369 earned the nickname the "Harlem Hell Fighters." The 369 were in the front lines continuously for 191 days. Sergeant Henry Johnson of the 369 received the Medal of Honor posthumously by President Obama in 2015. He died in 1929 and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. The 369 is the most famous of the African American combat regiments.

The 370, 371 and 372 regiments also saw combat. The 371 and 372 became part of the French 157th Division, along with the French 2nd Moroccan Regiment. The 157th was known as the "Red Hand" Division. The 371 and 372 distinguished themselves in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. The 372 was in fierce fighting with German forces, which included hand to hand combat. One hundred and seventy three soldiers from the 372 were recipients of either the Croix de Guerre or Distinguished Service Cross. Corporal Freddie Stowers of the 371 received the Medal of Honor posthumously in 1991 for bravery in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.

By the end of war, the 369, 370, 371, and 372 had sustained casualties totaling more than 2500. Casualties included those who were wounded, died of wounds, or killed in action. The French Government was impressed with the performance of the African American regiments. The 369 and 372 regiments received the Croix de Guerre and Palm. Sergeant Henry Johnson of the 369 was one of the first American Soldiers to receive the Croix de Guerre.

More than 350,000 African Americans served in World War I. Many of these men served in labor units, which were called Pioneer Infantry Battalions, Labor Battalions, or Engineer Service Battalions. These soldiers worked repairing roads, recovering bodies of soldiers and salvaging equipment, often under enemy fire.



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Following the Armistice, African American troops returned home to a segregated and racist society. Their contributions to the war effort were largely overlooked. There were African American World War I soldiers lynched still wearing their uniforms. The World War I Centennial provides an important opportunity to recognize and celebrate the contributions and sacrifices of African American World War I soldiers.

Reading #1 Sources:

- 1.) *The American Negro In The World War*
By Emmett J. Scott (1919)
- 2.) 93rd Division Summary of Operations in the World War
Prepared by The American Battle Monuments Commission (1944)
- 3.) *Fighting For Respect: African American Soldiers in WWI*
By Jami L. Bryan (2006)
- 4.) *Yankee Negroes in Horizon Blue Led Way to Rhine*
The Stars and Stripes: (April 4, 1919)



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Photograph #2: Homer Lawson



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Homer Lawson Information:

Born: September 1896, Washington Court House, Ohio

Enlists: 1917 Ohio National Guard, 9th Separate Battalion

World War I Service: 372nd Infantry, Co. K, Private

Killed in Action: September 28, 1918, Meuse-Argonne Campaign

- Body returned to U.S. August 1921, on the SS Cantigny

Buried: August 16, 1921 Greenlawn Cemetery, Columbus, Ohio

Commemoration: American Legion Post #653 named in honor of Homer Lawson

Homer Lawson Information Sources:

- 1) *The Gold Star of Victory Memorial*. Compiled by Marksbury and Lambertson, Published by The Memorial Printing Co. Columbus, Ohio (1918)
- 2) *The Official Roster of Ohio Soldiers, Sailors and Marines In the World War 1917-1918*, Volume 10
- 3) Ohio Graves Registration Card



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Image Title: 372nd Infantry Regiment on Broad Street, Columbus Ohio

Source: Ohio Memory

<http://www.ohiomemory.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16007coll51/id/893/rec/1>



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Image Title: Regimental Colors of the 372nd Infantry Regiment, 93rd Infantry Division

Source: Ohio Memory

<http://www.ohiomemory.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/flags/id/660/rec/1>



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Extension Activity or Extended Reading:

From: The Stars and Stripes: April 4, 1919:

Yankee Negroes in Horizon Blue Led Way to Rhine

Two Regiments in the 93rd Division Wear Croix de Guerre on Colors

In Victorious Offensives

Shoulder Insignia Exemplifies Alliance of Our Colored Troops with French Army

Blue denim to horizon blue -- American pick to French rifle, with lots of use for it from Reims to the Rhine -- that is only a part of the story of the 93rd Division, the negro soldiers from New York and points west who fought under the tricolor and in French equipment from the time they heard the first big one till the Kaiser took the count.

Despite their strange surroundings, their stranger equipment, their few days in which to learn the trench tricks of French veterans, and the occasional blind spots in liaison when it was too late for "no compree," the 369th, 370th, 371st and 372nd colored regiments came through with two regimental Croix de Guerre and a great deal of honest pride in the shoulder insignia that shows on its black background a blue French helmet as a memento of their very foreign service.

When this division joined the French it was blended even more perfectly into its background, as far as the eye could see, than any white regiment could be. Nearly all the German intelligence officers swallowed them whole as African Colonials. Even one group that struck to the Yankee brand of tin hat was credited in Boche reports as French blacks "equipped with English helmets."

The 93rd was a friend in need for our ally and in most cases they became friends indeed, with every effort made to put them on equality and the French cuisine strained to the utmost to produce a kick-proof chow.



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In the Afrique Sector

The 369th, whose reports are the most completely written, was put at the disposal of the 16th Division of the Eighth French Army Corps on March 18, 1918. Three weeks training within sound of the guns under French instructors and with French equipment was a startling change for men who had had only guard duty in the States and stevedore work in France. On April 8 they were put into a sector, doubled with French battalions, two battalions in the front line from the west bank of the Aisne to Ville-sur-Tourbe. They were treated with great cordiality by the French and the sub-sector, named "Afrique," became veritably their own when it was put under their commanding officer on April 29.

Despite the difference in language there were no misunderstandings, and a remarkably efficient support from the French kitchens did a great deal to "increase the efficiency," according to the official reports.

It was the fate of the 369th to take an active part in the famous July defensive near Reims, where the masterly stroke of French strategy lured the Germans into a futile pounding of empty trenches over whose ruins they wasted the force of the drive that was to take them to Chalons. While the Germans tore the network of forward trenches with tons of high explosive, a screen of men and guns was kept in the front lines and a part of this screen was made of men of the 369th. For a time the terrible bombardment cut off all liaison and runners linked the distance that telephone wires could not weather. Without rest or food, the men were finally withdrawn and marched six kilometers, where they acted as relief for the Moroccans of the 161st Division, sharing in a successful counter-attack.

"Superior Numbers" of One

From this time on they were in continual action in the fighting about the Butte de Mesnil and the Main-de-Massiges, from July 23 to August 19. Here a violent German barrage cut off a lieutenant and four men who were made prisoner and were being taken back to the German lines when a sergeant appeared and, with nothing but his bayonet and a goodly supply of furor Africanus, killed the guard and released his comrades. In German reports captured later the affair was described as a "blutlustig" attack by superior numbers.

In the Meuse-Argonne drive the 369th was with the 161st French (Moroccan) Division, and on September 26 helped the Moroccans in the capture of Dormans. The next day, with liaison with units on their flanks partially destroyed, they advanced through the dark and the uncut barbed wire, accomplishing what the French declared was the "well-nigh impossible." On the 29th they had a large share in the capture of Sechault.

The regiment was given the Croix de Guerre its colors were decorated and on November 18 it reached the Rhine, in the "marche triomphale," the first allied troops, their commander



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claims, to reach the river. In all their fighting they can boast that they never lost a prisoner or a foot of trench.

The record of the 370th Regiment is fragmentary. They were put immediately with the French and were attached variously to the 72nd, 10th, 34th and 36th French Divisions from April to August 31, 1918.

Often Passed Objective

There were difficulties that arose because of difference in language and the regiment only functioned as a whole for three weeks, but on its departure the French complimented the men on the manner in which they fought, remarking that they often went beyond their objective.

In the Oise-Aisne offensive, from September 17 to October 12, they saw action and again from October 24 until the armistice.

On September 22 the regiment held a sector near L'Ecluse, and three days' fighting up to the 30th saw all their objectives gained. On October 12 the men engaged in the fighting in the Bois de Monters were complimented. On the 5th they captured an enemy battery at Val St. Peine.

The 371st was in the Verdun sector from June 13 until September 14, in the Meuse-Argonne drive from September 27 until October 6, and in Alsace from October 16 until the armistice.

At Verdun they were used as support for the French 68th Division. In the Argonne they acted as a part of the reserve of the 9th French Corps and captured Côte 168 with the 372nd on September 28. The next day they took several points, including a railroad station, pushed on, and in a bloody engagement where they suffered heavily, captured Triers farm on the 30th.

Casualties Exceed Thousand

Their entire casualties amounted to 1,003 men and when they left the French command, published orders declared that they possessed "the finest qualities of audacity and bravery which are the attributes of shock troops."

The 372nd spent a period of training in the Argonne from June 6 until July 14. In the Meuse-Argonne offensive, this regiment was a part of the French 157th attached to the 10th Army Corps. They were in a brisk and bitter encounter north of Fontaine-en-Dormois, where they reached all their objectives and captured a number of supplies. They contend with the 369th for the capture of Sechault.



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They were especially complimented upon their patrol work, and the French gave them the Croix de Guerre and decorated their colors. They spent the time from October 13 to November 11 in the Vosges.

Special thanks to the Library of Congress.

To view the article in its original form, please click [here](#).



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Additional Resources:

- 1.) United States World War One Centennial Commission:
<http://www.worldwar1centennial.org>
- 2.) Ohio Memory - World War I in Ohio: <http://www.ohiomemory.org/cdm/wwi>
- 3.) WWI in Ohio Union Bibliography: <http://www.ohiohistoryhost.org/wwibib/>
- 4.) Ohio History Connection: The African American Experience in Ohio 1850 - 1920 "Story of the 372nd Infantry by those who Fought":
<http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/html/page0c78.html?ID=8243>
- 5.) History in the Headlines: World War I Hero Henry Johnson finally receives Medal of Honor:
<http://www.history.com/news/wwi-hero-henry-johnson-finally-receives-medal-of-honor>
- 6.) The French Government: World War I
<http://www.memoiredeshommes.sga.defense.gouv.fr/en/article.php?larub=78&titre=first-world-war>
- 7.) The American Legion: <http://www.legion.org>
- 8.) Veterans of Foreign Wars: <http://www.vfw.org>

This lesson plan was written by Paul LaRue. A retired thirty-year high school social studies teacher, Paul has received numerous state and national teaching awards. He serves as a member of the Ohio World War I Centennial Committee.



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