

They Never Flinched: The African-American 371st Infantry Regiment's Path to Glory during World War I



An unidentified 371st soldier with his daughter

They were South Carolinians sent into the bloody trenches of World War I. They came out as heroes – having earned 146 individual citations for bravery and eventually a Congressional Medal of Honor.

The 371st Infantry Regiment formed in August 1917 and consisted of African-American draftees mostly from South Carolina and white officers. After training at Camp Jackson, the unit arrived on the Western Front in April 1918. It was placed under the command of the French Army because of their desperate need for new troops, and out of fear that racial tension might erupt between black and white American soldiers. After four years with over a million French casualties and the stalemate of trench warfare, France was grateful for the African-Americans' willingness to fight to push the Germans from French soil.

The 371st was given French equipment, and had to turn in their prized Springfield rifles for French rifles. The unit was reorganized to fit the French army structure and spent the spring of 1918 training in French tactics, communicating via interpreters. That summer, the regiment was put into the line to relieve exhausted French and allied Italian units.

Having experienced battle, the 371st was then thrown into the climatic "Final Offensive" of the Great War in September and fought well, suffering heavy casualties: over 1,000 men out of 2,384 were lost in eight days. They won battles, capturing prisoners and great quantities of German munitions. Even more startling was the feat of shooting down three German airplanes with rifle and machine gun fire, perhaps a record for small arms' ground fire. Company commander Capt. W. R. Richey of Laurens saw the unit capture five miles of German-held territory, September 26-27, 1918, without artillery support to clear the way:

"This was the first time any of them had been under aimed shell and machine-gun fire and they stood it like moss-covered old-timers. They never flinched or showed the least sign of fear."

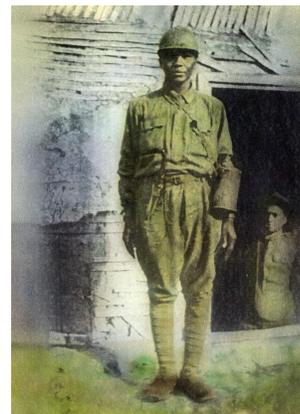
Vice-Admiral Moreau, on behalf of the French Government, decorated the regimental colors on January 27, 1919, in Brest. The 371st won the French Legion of Honor and the Croix de Guerre. The American Distinguished Service Cross was awarded to ten officers and twelve enlisted men.

Columbia came together in support of the 371st. A mass meeting was held at Sidney Park Church to launch a fundraising effort for a community reception at Allen University in honor of the return of the 371st. The grand event was held on February 29, 1919. African-American community leaders, including I.S. Leevy and C.A. Johnson, spoke in honor of the regiment. The two flags of the 371st Regiment were presented to the community. Those flags are now part of the flag collection of the South Carolina Confederate Relic Room and Military Museum.

With the war over, the unit was disbanded and the story of the 371st faded quickly.

Fortunately, this end was not the end of the story. On September 28, 1918, just six weeks before the end of World War I, Corporal Freddie Stowers, 21, of Sandy Springs, S. C. was killed leading Co. C from the 371st into no-man's land, to capture German positions. After feigning surrender the Germans opened up with machinegun and mortar fire instantly destroying over half of Co. C. Stowers rallied the men and led them to knock out one machine gun nest, and though mortally wounded, urged them on to capture a second trench line, stopping the threat and causing heavy enemy casualties. His commanding officer recommended him for the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for valor.

The nomination languished for 70 years. In 1988, several members of Congress began campaigning on behalf of African-American World War I soldiers who had not been properly recognized. After an extensive investigation ordered by the Secretary of Army, Stowers was awarded the Medal of Honor. It was presented to Stowers' two surviving sisters at the White House by President George Bush in 1991. He was the first African-American soldier from World War I to earn the medal.



371st soldier with French helmet