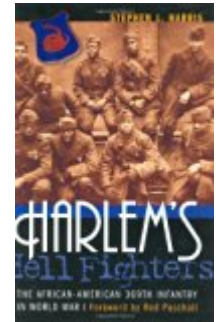


Stephen L. Harris. *Harlem's Hell Fighters: The African-American 369th Infantry in World War I.* Washington: Brassey's, 2003. xviii + 301 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57488-386-2.



Reviewed by Jennifer D. Keene

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In *Harlem's Hell Fighters: The African American 369th Infantry in World War I*, Stephen L. Harris offers a straightforward narrative of this regiment's storied experience in the First World War. Those familiar with the William Miles film documentary of the regiment, *Men of Bronze*, will find the story familiar, with Harris providing useful amplification of key personalities and events highlighted in the film. The 369th Infantry began as the 15th New York Infantry Regiment, and its original members always preferred this National Guard designation over the one it received after having been mustered into federal service during the First World War and sent to France. By receiving a designation in the 300s, numbers usually reserved for draftees, the unit felt slighted by Washington. As Harris notes throughout the book, however, this was the least of the insults that the regiment endured during its federal service. Racial assaults, with the men in the regiment often giving as good as they got, hampered the 15th New York Infantry's training experiences in the United States. Sent overseas quickly to avoid further confrontations with southern white troops who resented serving alongside black combatants, the

unit soon found itself building railroads in St. Nazaire and doubtful that it would ever see the front lines. Thanks to their commander Colonel William Hayward's persistent badgering, the unit finally got a front-line assignment, but under the command of the French rather than American Army. Chagrined initially at being pawned off to the French, the 369th (as it was now known) went on to serve the longest of any American regiment in the front lines (191 days) and to receive the French *croix de guerre* in recognition of its battlefield contributions. The unit also claimed some of the war's most inspirational war heroes--Henry Johnson, Needham Roberts, and William Butler--as their own.

Harris tells this story and more in *Harlem's Hell Fighters*. His decision to begin and end his book with concerts by the renowned jazz musician James Reese Europe reflects his effort to draw out some of the larger-than-life personalities who played an important role in the unit's history. Europe gets star billing, from his early role in forming an elite regimental band to spur enlistments to his murder by a distraught member of

his band after the 369th regimental band's final postwar concert. In tracing Europe's life, Harris relies heavily on a memoir written over twenty years later by his collaborator, the successful musician and songwriter Noble Sissle. William Hayward, Hamilton Fish, Jr., and Arthur Little, some of the unit's white officers who left a substantial paper trail of their feelings and reactions, also receive a large amount of attention. With limited material available to trace the sentiments of the bulk of enlisted men, Harris does his best to project possible feelings onto the men, resorting at times to passages such as the following which describes the emotions of the men as they sailed out of New York Harbor headed for France: "Spottswood Poles, now a wagoner in the Supply Company, might have wondered if he'd ever make the trip back across the Atlantic to play baseball once more with his talented teammates on the New York Lincoln Giants. Leaning on the railing, the Fowler brothers, all seven of them, perhaps wondered if they'd all make it back to Katherine, their mother, now waiting for them to return to Glen Cove" (p. 141). And so on.

There are sections of this book that read quite well. When chronicling the race violence and prejudice that plagued the unit as it trained in the United States, Harris's prose is gripping. Equally intriguing is Harris's point that despite a long, difficult battle to get authorization from the New York governor to raise the unit in 1913, Haywood had significant trouble recruiting black officers for the 15th New York Infantry. It is never made perfectly clear, however, why New York's elite black community shunned military service in the reserves. Harris does a better job of providing the larger context necessary to understand black soldiers' experiences during the war, including discussion of the Houston mutiny by regular black troops, the East Saint Louis race riots, and the silent parade down Fifth Avenue to protest lynching.

Some of the weaknesses of the book in part reflect the difficulty of doing a regimental history of a mass army that over the course of the war made little effort to preserve the regional integrity of National Guard units. Harris notes that midway into their service overseas, the 369th began receiving large numbers of drafted troops, many poorly trained, who would eventually form the bulk of the unit. Harris dismisses these troops in a few lines of complaint from Haywood about their poor performance in battle, implying that they were never legitimate members of the 369th Infantry Regiment. This failure to adequately consider the experiences and background of these draft troops more completely alongside the detailed portrait that Harris provides of the volunteers' experiences significantly weakens this as an authoritative account of the 369th.

It is an often repeated fact that the 369th was in line longer than any other American regiment, but what is so striking in this account of their battle experiences is how inexperienced the unit seemed to be in each engagement that it fought. Even the unit's veterans behaved in a strikingly novice fashion as late as September 1918, cheering as they watched one company advance against the Germans, a gesture that the Germans applauded by shelling their position. Why did these soldiers never become battle-hardened veterans? Is this a problem of relying on too few generally positive postwar officers' accounts? Or is this marker of time in the front lines really not indicative of substantial exposure to conditions along the Western Front? In other words, what is the real meaning of underscoring the time in the front lines of this unit?

The 369th served with the French Army, and it is a relief to see Harris immediately put aside the tired canard that the French were color-blind when it came to dealing with black troops by pointing out that the French enthusiastically brought West Africans to fight as shock troops along the Western Front. In this section Harris

raises an interesting question to which he never returns: the possibility that the French initially considered black Americans possible shock troops who would take the bulk of casualties in initial assaults. Rumors that this was the American Army's intention circulated throughout African-American communities during the war, and it is intriguing to consider that it was the French rather than Americans who considered this use of black troops. But having raised this question Harris never returns to answer it once these troops actually engage in battle under French command. As importantly, there is no feel for the day-to-day interactions between these American soldiers and their French counterparts. More so than other American soldiers, whose relationships with the French were substantial, these troops had both the opportunity and need to establish good working and personal relationships with the French. Breaking out a bit from a strictly regimental perspective at this point would give the account a stronger connection to the total American war experience in France.

This is, therefore, primarily a narrative account which offers no real overall argument and breaks little new ground in detailing the mostly known features of the unit's wartime service. It is, however, a readable book aimed at general readers that provides enough human interest and historical context to give a reasonably comprehensive portrait of the 369th's experiences during the war. It is to Harris's credit that he included footnotes and did a significant amount of primary-source research for a book aimed at a non-academic audience.

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