

HENRY JOHNSON

1897-1929



Henry Johnson of Albany, New York is the most celebrated member of the Harlem Hellfighters. While on advance guard with Needham Roberts in the early morning hours of May 15, 1918, a German patrol of 24 soldiers attacked and wounded Roberts and Johnson with a shower of grenades. Roberts, too wounded to rise, threw grenades at the onrushing Germans while Johnson fought furiously, emptying his rifle clip at the enemy and then wildly swinging his rifle as a club. As German soldiers captured Roberts and started dragging him away, Johnson successfully fended them

off with the butt of his rifle and a bolo knife. The Germans fled in panic and Johnson returned Roberts safely to the trench after suffering more than a dozen wounds.

Accounts of Johnson's actions quickly appeared in newspapers across America and he was featured on recruiting posters targeting African American communities. He received the Croix de Guerre with Gold Palm Leaf, France's highest award, and after the war he arrived home to a hero's welcome and become a popular speaker throughout the country. His fame, however, was short lived and he died in obscurity ten years later.

In 2003, the United States Army posthumously awarded him the Distinguished Service Cross for his bravery, and nearly 100 years later, in late 2014 Congress approved a bill authorizing awarding the Medal of Honor to Henry Johnson which President Barack Obama is expected to sign in 2015.