

# WORLD WAR I



*Members of the 369th who received the French Croix de Guerre for gallantry in action display their medals upon their arrival in the United States, 1919. National Archives*

Despite nearly a century and half of proven accomplishments on the battlefield, African Americans in the military faced persistent racism and segregation. However, with the

United States' entry in 1917 into the war in Europe, African Americans viewed this as an opportunity to not only fight for their country but to fight for their equality. W.E.B. Du Bois urged African Americans to put aside their "special grievances" and "close ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy."

*Shortly after its formation, the 15th New York National Guard adopted the coiled rattlesnake ready to strike as its regimental symbol. It was featured on patches, pins, and flags and remains part of the unit's insignia today.*



*National and state colors of the 369th United States Infantry (15th Regiment New York National Guard) parade in New York City, 1919. The 369th was the only federalized National Guard regiment to carry a state flag throughout the war. National Archives*

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*The 369th regimental band, which had achieved great recognition and popularity in New York prior to the war, toured throughout France during the winter and spring of 1918. Led by Lt. James Reese Europe, the band not only helped to publicize the arrival of American troops and lift sagging French morale, but also introduced jazz to Europe. New York State Military Museum*

Although the number of black enlistments in the nation's military forces had been strictly limited for decades before the war, with the urgent need to raise 4 million volunteers, the restrictions were lifted. Nearly 400,000 African Americans were drafted

or enlisted in the US military forces, but in segregated unit under white officers, their role was largely limited to menial support services such as cooks, drivers, and laborers.

African Americans had to fight for the right to fight and the US Army eventually authorized two black divisions, the 92nd and 93rd, as combat units. Despite the distinguished records of these units in the great struggle over there, after the war black veterans returned home to continue the struggle for racial equality.



*Parade spectators welcome home the heroic Harlem Hellfighters, 1919. National Archives*