

from
“FROM HARLEM TO THE RHINE”
1918

—Arthur Little—

Despite the often degrading treatment and discrimination they faced from whites in the United States, African American men enlisted in large numbers to serve in segregated units in World War I. In this excerpt from his autobiography, company commander Arthur Little recalls the heroism in battle of the 369th Infantry, an African American Army regiment.

READING FOCUS:

What influence might descriptions of battle have had on public understanding of the combat experience?

At about half past two in the morning, at the point where my party had lain all the night before, the Germans came. There were no Americans there to meet them that night, however, and the Boche were able to make their way in peace, a hundred and fifty yards or more to the west, to the rear of Combat Group No. 29.

Number 29 was a tiny post, actually isolated, but theoretically a part of number 28, some fifty or sixty yards still farther to the West.

Number 28 was garrisoned by a strong force, of at least half a platoon, under command of an officer, Lieutenant Richardson Pratt of Brooklyn.

Number 29 was manned by four men and a corporal. The post was but little more than an islet of observation. Its armament had no automatic rifles. It was a part of the command of the officer stationed at Number 28.

As the enemy patrol made its way cautiously through the field of wire that protected the rear of Number 29 from rushing tactics, some slight sound (probably that of the functioning of a wire clipper) arrested the attention of Private Needham Roberts, on guard at the east side of the enclosure. Roberts slipped over to the other side, and, cautioning his partner of the relief, Private Henry Johnson, for silence, led him back to the spot where the noise had been heard.

Together the boys listened and peered. Presently that sound was repeated. An illuminating rocket was discharged into the field from which the sound came, and, “Corporal of the Guard!” was shouted at the top of the voices of the two plucky little volunteers—Roberts of Trenton, N.J., and Johnson of Albany, N.Y.

The signal of discovery was the signal for attack—for the Germans. Quickly and without further caution the wire clippers worked. A volley of grenades was thrown into the little fortified area of Combat Group No. 29, and both Roberts and Johnson were wounded. The Corporal and the off relief of two men, sleeping in the dugout, were penned in.

Roberts, badly hurt and unable to rise, propped himself against the door of the dugout and threw grenades out into the darkness.

Johnson was back on his feet, rifle in hand, in time to meet the rush of the Germans as they came piling into the enclosure.

The Labelle rifle carries a magazine clip of but three cartridges. Johnson fired his three shots—the last one almost muzzle to breast of the Boche bearing down upon him. As the German fell, a comrade jumped over his body, pistol in hand, to avenge his death.

There was no time for reloading. Johnson swung his rifle round his head, and brought it down with a thrown blow upon the head of the German. The German went down, crying, in perfectly good Bowery English, "The little black so and so has got me!"

"Yas, an' dis little black so so'll git yer 'gin—ef yer git up!" went back the high pitched voice of Henry Johnson, in admirable repartee, as he varied, for a few seconds, the monotonous call for the Corporal of the Guard which he kept repeating, between the grunts of his exertions, all through the fight.

With the enemy in the front for the moment disposed of, Johnson glanced over his shoulder to the left, to see how things were going with his partner. Two Germans had lifted Roberts from the ground, one had him by the shoulders and one by the feet, and they were about to rise, to carry him away—a prisoner.

Our men were unanimous in the opinion that death was to be preferred to a German prison. But Johnson was of the opinion that victory was to be preferred to either.

With side spring, the active little soldier from Albany came down like a wildcat upon the shoulders of the German with the head of Roberts between his knees. As Johnson sprang, he unsheathed his bolo knife, and as his knees landed upon the shoulders of that ill-fated Boche, the blade of the knife was buried to the hilt through the crown of the German's head....

Johnson turned once more to the front. He was none too soon. The Boche who had been knocked down by clubbed rifle was up! He was up and mad—fighting mad. Down upon the plucky little Johnson he bore—his Lueger automatic pistol spitting a stream of fire as he charged. Johnson felt a burning, stinging pain. He cried out as if in despair; and dropped upon hands and knees. The German closed in. The next instant Johnson was up and under the guard of the German; and that terrible bolo knife was in the German's abdomen. Johnson showed no quarter. The knife was turned. The enemy soldier was disembowelled.

The enemy patrol was in a panic. The dead and wounded were piled upon stretchers and carried away.

When daylight came, we trailed the course of the enemy retreat (a roundabout course of at least a half mile through the woods) to the back of the river, where they crossed. We trailed the course with the greatest of ease, by pools of blood, blood-soaked handkerchiefs and first aid bandages, and blood-smearred logs, where the routed party had rested.

Johnson was wounded in many places. He was almost exhausted. He seemed to know by instinct, however, that the mere turning point of a battle is not the time for the victor to suspend hostilities. The enemy was retreating. Certainty must be made that it should never come back.

As the Germans piled through the chicane which they had cut in our wire, Johnson pelted them with grenades. We found evidence that at least one man had been terribly torn by the iron of these

explosions. At the narrowest point in the opening, where they could do no better than go in single file, was found a terrible mass of flesh and blood, and the cloth of a coat, and the pulped material of a first aid packet—blown open. Upon the ground, in this opening, was the shell hole blown by the grenade. The hole was of the size and shape of a five gallon punch bowl; and it was almost filled with thick, sticky blood. In the Champagne country, the soil is of a chalky clay, of a quality to hold water for very slow absorption. The blood of that grenade-blown punch bowl was not wholly absorbed for more than a week.

As the relief-party, headed by Lieutenant Pratt, entered the enclosure of Combat Group Number 29, Henry Johnson fainted. As he passed out, he mumbled the words—"Corporal of the Guard!"

The first news that I received of "The Battle of Henry Johnson" was brought to me by Sergeant-Major Hooper, at about 3:30 in the morning.

Hooper entered my cabin and reported that there had been a fight in the left P.C. (*point d'apuis*); that no official report had as yet come down; but that two wounded men (probably dying) had just passed our headquarters upon a flat-car of the mule-power railroad line, to be taken to the sector dressing station, and to wait for an ambulance, which had been ordered....

Both Roberts and Johnson were remarkably coherent in their statements. It was the first fight we'd had in the regiment, and the first of our casualties. I feared that these men would die. They were wounded in so many places. I suppose my face must have shown emotional concern. I finished my note making and pocketed my book, just as the ambulance arrived.

Henry Johnson looked up at me and motioned that he had something more to say. I knelt at his side.

"Suh Cap'n Suh," said the wounded hero, in a low, husky voice, but with an indescribably gentle smile, "Suh Cap'n Suh, yoo all doan' want er worry 'bout me. Ah'm all right. Ah've ben *shot befo'*!"

Excerpt from *From Harlem to the Rhine* by Arthur W. Little, pp. 193-198.

Analysis Questions:

1. What signal did the Germans attack on?
2. Why did Johnson say the troops didn't need to worry about him?