



Commonwealth of Kentucky

Kentucky Commission on Human Rights

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Press Release

Date: February 27 2017

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Executive Director Johnson urges people to have tenacity of WWI Hell Fighters

The Kentucky Commission on Human Rights would like to recognize during Black History Month one of the greatest Army regiments in American History, the 369th Infantry Regiment of World War I.

The all-black unit came to be known as the Harlem Hell Fighters for their ferocious determination to win in battle and to fight for freedom. Some of the Hell Fighters were actually Kentuckians.

The Kentucky Dept. of Veterans Affairs recognized the Hell Fighters in February, saying:

“Kentuckians who fought with the Harlem Hell Fighters include Private Bert Beckham, Private Robert Wooten, Private Bradley Logan and Private Ionia Harris, all of Shelbyville, and Private Leonard Todd of Finchville. Their military records are incomplete, but they appear to include the notation “MoH,” an abbreviation often used for Medal of Honor. Although none of the men are listed among the official recipients of the Medal of Honor, “MoH” could refer to the Croix de Guerre, France’s equivalent medal of valor, which France awarded to many of the Harlem Hell Fighters.”

The Hell Fighters were disrespected by many of their white fellow American comrades and leaders, but these members of the 369th Infantry were treated with the highest regard by our allies in Europe who fought alongside them, unscathed by the racism and prejudice that tore at America.

“On one tour the unit was in combat for more than six months – longer than any other unit in World War 1. The Harlem Hell Fighters never lost a man through capture, never lost a trench or a foot of ground to the enemy. Two of the unit earned Medals of Honor and many earned the Distinguished Service Cross. The government of France gave its highest medal of valor – the Croix de Guerre – to many of the men and to the unit as a whole. The Harlem Hell Fighters made their point many times over and paved the way for future black soldiers.” (Ky. Dept. of Veteran Affairs)

The Hell Fighters were not a regiment with which World War I enemies wanted to contend, and these Americans fought with their whole hearts for their nation, regardless of what non-black Americans thought about the color of their skin.

These larger-than-life black soldiers had tenacity. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines tenacity as having the quality of being “persistent in maintaining, adhering to, or seeking something valued or desired. “

I encourage every young person regardless of race, gender, or background to grab onto this kind of tenacity and not give up as they press toward the American Dream of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

We urge everyone to read about the Hell Fighters’ stories by visiting various websites on the Internet.

The Kentucky Commission on Human Rights is the state government authority that enforces the Kentucky Civil Rights Act and the U.S. Civil Rights Act, the laws that make discrimination illegal.