Civil Rights and the Great War

_A Lesser Known Connection_

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Abstract:

*When thinking of the First World War, Civil Rights isn’t usually one of the first things that comes to mind. The reality, is that this Great War played a major role in shaping the movement which became the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Multiracial troops were fighting together while racial tension hung thick in the air. When the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment mutinied in Houston, it led to the largest court martial in US history and the deaths of thirteen soldiers. The Hellfighters of Harlem were highly decorated by the French for their dedication and service during the Great War, yet in the United States they were not recognized for their service and sacrifice because of the racial tension. This paper looks at the impact that the Houston mutiny of 1917 had on the Civil Rights movement in the United States and way that African Americans contributed to the Great War.*

When thinking about the Great War, one doesn’t commonly associate it with the fight for Civil Rights in the United States. Yet the reality is that the War played a major role in forming the foundation of the movement. Black troops were fighting alongside White troops, but racial tension still hung thick in the air. In August of 1917, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, a Black Infantry Unit out of Houston, Texas mutinied out of retaliation of mistreatment by the people of Houston. It was not uncommon for police to unnecessarily arrest or beat these men for no reason.¹ At the time, it was thought that a police officer had beaten one of their men to death, but after the men mutinied it was learned that the man had not in fact been killed. This mutiny lead to one of the largest court martials and murder trials

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in the history of the United States. As a result of the mutiny, the 24th Infantry was not permitted to fight in World War One, which is why they had been in Houston to begin with.\textsuperscript{2} Thirteen of the soldiers that mutinied were sentenced to death and immediately executed.\textsuperscript{3}

The Harlem Hellfighters were members of the 369th infantry who fought under French command during the Great War, and were the first African American pilots to fly during the war. They were highly decorated by the French and received the highest honors by the French military. Returning home from the war, these men were greeted with the same lack of respect that other African Americans so often encountered and the realization of the inequality, even in the face of war was ever prevalent.

Although this riot isn’t very well known or documented in history textbooks it shows the struggle between races that plagued the twentieth century. Much of the research and documentation of the civil rights struggle focuses on the movements of the 1960s but we can trace some of the roots of the movement back to the Great War. While this struggle was so predominant on US soil, Blacks and Whites were fighting and dying together on the battlefield overseas. This paper will look at how the Houston Riot of 1917 and the Harlem Hellfighters played a role in the shaping of the Civil Rights movement on the home front, while Blacks and Whites fought together in Europe.

Slavery in the United States was abolished in 1865 with the thirteenth amendment but racial tensions and segregation continued to be prevalent well into the 1990s with tension between races continuing to be in the news today. In the 1900s the Civil Rights movement began to gain some momentum, especially following World War One. When the United

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid
States entered World War One, it opened the doors for the fight for Civil Rights. The idea that blacks and whites could fight together and die for their country together but couldn’t have those same interactions on US soil began to stew in the minds of African Americans. They returned from the war and were greeted with inequality that they thought they had rid themselves of overseas, but the same struggles they left behind raged on when they returned. The ideas of inequality had been there, as there had been a conscience of inequality for decades—but with the war, a new awakening came forth.

In August of 1917, the 24th Infantry Regiment, composed of black enlisted men mutinied in Houston Texas. This company had more civil disputes than did many other black troops and tensions were especially high in Texas where this company was based. On August 23rd, 1917, a rumor had made it back to their camp that one of their own had been killed by Houston Authorities. These men had been through discrimination and the harassment that came with it and they took to the streets against their officers’ orders. There had been a variety of factors that played into the mutiny including the discrimination and harassment that these men had experienced during their time in Houston, as well as a change in commanding officers who had yet to gain the trust of the African American soldiers that they now commanded. Racial tension was not new across the United States although slavery had been abolished years before. Newspapers reported prominent race related news stories in the days leading up to the Houston Riots. So often though, these stories go untold in the history textbooks and get lumped together with the civil rights movements in the 1960s. What we

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4 Black Past. “24th Infantry Regiment (1866-1951).”
5 Ibid
7 Ibid
begin to see with the Houston Mutiny was that the tension and motive for racial change was around during WWI and that the war was one of many catalysts for change.

The mutiny began when two men of the infantry got involved with altercations with the Houston police, in separate but related incidents. Following the first incident, another man went to confront the officer who had been involved and did not return to the barracks for an extended period of time. Rumor got around that the man had been shot and killed. The men seized weapons and ammunition and more than 100 soldiers marched on the city.\(^8\) It became a violent dispute and local white residents armed themselves, leading to the death of 4 of the black soldiers, 15 white residents and leaving dozens wounded.\(^9\) This mutiny lead to the largest court martial in United States history, where one hundred seventeen soldiers were tried with one hundred ten being convicted. Two days after the trial, thirteen men were executed before the court papers could even make it to Washington DC to be reviewed and ninety-one were sentenced to some type of confinement.\(^10\) The hanging of these men was the first mass execution since 1847. The legality of the execution isn’t questionable due to the United States being at war, but there was uproar surrounding the fact that the men had no chance to seek clemency. The men had requested to be shot by a firing squad but the court determined that they would carry out the sentence through hanging.\(^11\) This set a new precedent in court marshalls as Brigadier General Samuel Ansell set forth with orders that instances such as this do not take place again with General Orders No. 7 which prevent the execution of any

\(^{8}\) Schuler, “Race Riot” p. 300


http://www.blackpast.org/aaw/houston-mutiny-1917


\(^{11}\) Ibid
sentence involving death before a review and determination of legality done by the Judge Advocate General (JAG).\textsuperscript{12}

Per court records, one soldier, Callie Glenn was charged with “disobedience of an order to remain in camp, mutiny, murder, assault with intent to commit murder in connection with the riots of the 24\textsuperscript{th} infantry at Houston Texas, August 23, 1917.” And was dishonorably discharged and sentenced to labor in the penitentiary for life.\textsuperscript{13} In 1919, Glenn wrote a note to Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Ansell to ask for a commutation of his sentence because he claims to have been one of the men who missed roll call and that he was not involved in the mutiny while other records show that through a physical examination he had wounds and scars which would be consistent with having participated in the riot.\textsuperscript{14} His story remained consistent throughout his sentence, that he had not been involved in the riot, yet other documents provided proof of his involvement.\textsuperscript{15} Glenn’s story is not an anomaly. Records show that he had favorable behavior in prison and had many favorable reasons to be released on parole or have his sentence commuted. But like his fellow soldiers, Glenn continued to serve his life sentence.

Soldiers like Callie Glenn had reached their tolerance point of dealing with the racial discrimination of the Southern United States. Although, in many cases, Black soldiers were treated unequally, there was also a push to use African American soldiers as an important part of the military. There was a faction of Whites who distrusted those of European descent during this period, with racism being projected on those of Irish and Northern European heritage and thought that the only “true Americans” were African Americans. These Whites

\textsuperscript{12} Borch, “Largest Murder Trial”
\textsuperscript{13} Documents obtained from the South Texas College of Law Houston Mutiny and Riots Archive “Callie Glenn”
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid
supported educating Blacks, extending equal rights and even potentially letting them
command White regiments of soldiers.\(^\text{16}\) There was still a strong group of White southerners
who wanted to prevent Blacks from joining the military, believing that doing so would be a
threat to their way of life.\(^\text{17}\) Although the 13th Amendment was signed in 1789, putting a
formal end to slavery in the US, many white Americans still held the ideals that African
Americans should remain uneducated and uninvolved in the day to day business of the nation.

The Army had difficulties here because, as progressive as they were in allowing
Blacks to even join the ranks, they were not willing to integrate troops. The Marine Corps was
strictly white, and the navy was very much a white division of the military.\(^\text{18}\) The Army was
the only unit that was very welcoming of African American involvement, although they were
not willing to integrate troops, even when they were desperate.\(^\text{19}\)

The Houston Mutiny shows how even during war time, racial tension was still at an
all-time high, especially in Texas and other southern states. We can look at the Harlem
Hellfighters and other instances where on the battleground, those discriminatory practices
weren’t quite as prevalent. This brings us to one of the biggest catalysts for the Civil Rights
movement gaining momentum, the fact that Blacks could die for their country right alongside
whites, but they weren’t equals in the eyes of the law.

Black leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois supported Black involvement in the War, with
the idea that the war would end European imperialism which would therefore liberate Blacks
worldwide.\(^\text{20}\) Sadly, this was not quite the case. DuBois had thought of Black involvement in

\(^{16}\) Ben Wright, “Victory and Defeat” P. 38-39
\(^{17}\) Ibid, P. 39
\(^{18}\) Ibid
\(^{19}\) Ibid
\(^{20}\) Wright, “Victory and Defeat” P. 38
the Great War, as fighting alongside Whites. The sad truth is that these soldiers were fighting in their own regiments, away from the eyes of their white counterparts. Many, such as the 369th Infantry were unable to be under US control due to orders by General Pershing, so many of these infantries were handed over to the French.21 These African American Soldiers were strong assets to the French in their war efforts, in fact, the first Black pilot that flew in the war was under French command, although he was a US soldier. The French highly decorated these US Soldiers, which were later dubbed the “Harlem Hellfighters.”22

The 369th Infantry was originally known as the 15th Infantry Division (Colored) of New York. It is thought to have only consisted of Blacks, although the designation of “colored” included Latinos, Asians, Puerto Ricans and Native Americans.23 As one Colonel Hayward said, it would be difficult for a German who captured one of the Puerto Ricans in a French uniform and have someone identify them that they were actually a member of a US National Guard regiment. They would be quite confused! These soldiers were some of America’s best, and were highly decorated by the French Army. The US government later recognized their contributions to the war effort.

There was widespread discrimination within the US Army during the Great War. Black leadership was rare, within the 15th of New York, of the 170 officers, only 5 were Black. Although it was a “colored” regiment, much of the leadership was White.24 This added to racial tensions among the members of the 15th New York. White supremacy was still strong

21 Gardner, “Harlem Hellfighters”  
22 Ibid  
23 Wright, “Victory and Defeat”  
24 Ibid
in the United States. The liberality of allowing blacks to fight was countered with segregating troops and keeping them under white commanders.\textsuperscript{25}

One of the things that drew African Americans into the military was the music and the band programs that many African Americans got involved with. Under the leadership of Jim Europe, African Americans rushed to be involved under his direction.\textsuperscript{26} They performed jazz and ragtime music and their music has a certain air of expression that other musicians that played about a war didn’t because of their experiences seeing the horrors of war. Europe lead the Harlem Hellfighters Band as a part of 369\textsuperscript{th} Infantry Division.\textsuperscript{27}

Following the war, racial conflict rose when black workers were used in the North to break up labor disputes.\textsuperscript{28} There was a migration of African Americans to the North during the war, and when soldiers began to return, things began to shift and change with the influx of males coming back to the North. Competition among soldiers coming back from the war, housing shortages and segregation all played into racial clashes that began to be more common following the end of the Great War.\textsuperscript{29} There was a rise in the activity of the KuKluxKlan, and a dramatic rise in racial violence across the United States following the end of World War I. This tension is what can be noted as beginning the civil rights movement. Although most notoriety goes to WWII for jump-starting the civil rights movement, many of the themes we see following WWI play crucial roles in the fight for civil rights later down the road.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid
\textsuperscript{26} Tim Gracyk. “James Reese Europe.”
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid
\textsuperscript{28} Jennifer Keene. “A ‘Brutalizing’ War? The USA after the First World War.” 84.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid
Today these soldiers are beginning to get recognition for their service and contributions to the war effort. In recent years, efforts have been made to award Medals of Honor, posthumously to these soldiers that fought with the Harlem Hellfighters. Soldiers that fought with the 369th were awarded the French Croix de Guerre, but the United States has yet to acknowledge the contributions that these soldiers made. Due to such deep-rooted segregation in the United States, soldiers such as Sgt. Henry Johnson were never recognized during their lifetime for their war contributions and awards were made posthumously. Aside from formal efforts to award distinguished medals and honors upon these soldiers, recently, graphic novels such as “The Harlem Hellfighters” by Max Brooks have found their way into popular culture. A recent awakening has found its way into the public and there seems to be a new interest in the contributions of African Americans to the war effort.

Conflict between races was nothing new within the United States military, but what began to become a movement for civil rights began with black soldiers returning home from battle with the fighting spirit they had gained in the war. Coming home from Europe, it was hard for many African Americans who had fought in the war to go back to being so segregated and disenfranchised, especially those that had fought with the French, where they were so highly respected. This was especially true when World War II came around, but the roots of the movement can get traced back to World War I. Seeing the opportunities afforded to Africans in Europe opened the eyes of the soldiers when they returned home to the United States.

31 Keene, “A ‘Brutalizing’ War?” 83.
Although there were a variety of factors that set the civil rights movement in motion, a major shift can be seen following WWI thanks to the contributions of African American soldiers. Often these soldiers are not given credit for their service, and many were awarded their medals and honors posthumously and received little recognition during their lifetime. The idea that these men of various races could serve on the battlefield together—that they could die together, but could not sit next to each other when they returned home was a strong catalyst for the unrest that comes to fruition with the civil rights movement in the 1960s.