

News Release

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Wyden, Merkley Send Letter to Secretary Panetta Seeking Medal of Honor for Henry Lincoln Johnson

While Serving in an all-black unit under French Command during World War I, Johnson went "above and beyond" the call of duty but has been denied the Medal of Honor for more than 90 years

Washington, D.C. – For more than 90 years, Sgt. Henry Lincoln Johnson – an African American World War I hero serving in an all-black unit under French Command – has been denied the Medal of Honor for single-handedly fighting off a German raiding party and saving the life of a fellow soldier. His actions earned him the French equivalent of the Medal of Honor in 1918. Today, U.S. Senators Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) have sent a letter to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, urging the Department of Defense to reevaluate Sgt. Johnson's case for the Medal of Honor in light of new primary source material documenting Johnson's heroics.

"Sergeant Johnson finally received his long overdue Purple Heart in 1996," Wyden and Merkley wrote in the letter. **"In 2003 after a herculean effort by his family, friends, and supporters, Sergeant Johnson was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Yet these awards do not properly recognize Sergeant Johnson's heroism. With the new evidence that has been uncovered, it is now possible for our nation to at last give Sergeant Johnson the recognition he deserves: the Medal of Honor."**

Wyden and Merkley are joined with U.S. Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY) in pushing for the expedited review and awarding of Johnson with the Medal of Honor. The issue came to Wyden and Merkley's attention by Portland City Commissioner Nick Fish, whose grandfather, Hamilton Fish, served as an officer in the 396th Infantry, under which Johnson served.

In the early morning hours of 15 May, 1918, Sgt. Johnson, a 21-year-old member of the all black 369th Infantry unit known as the "Harlem Hellfighters" was serving as a sentry with another member of his unit forward of the French lines. Due to the inherent racism of the time, black soldiers were not allowed to serve in combat positions with white American units. The Harlem Hellfighters were therefore put under the command of the French military. That evening, a

German raiding party of more than 20 soldiers attempted a surprise attack on the unit, severely injuring both Johnson and his companion. Johnson single-handedly thwarted the enemy attack -- suffering severe shrapnel, bullet and more than 20 knife wounds -- and ultimately protected his unit, killing several enemy soldiers, some in hand-to-hand combat.

For his valor, Johnson was immediately awarded the French Croix de Guerre Avec Palme – the highest award for valor the French can bestow. He was the first American to be awarded this honor. However, due to his race, he would not receive so much as a Purple Heart from the U.S. military for more than 75 years. Since Johnson’s unit was under French command, the U.S. military has claimed for more than nine decades that there were not enough credible U.S. sources to corroborate the story, despite there being enough credible French sources for the French military to award their highest honor to a foreign soldier.

One piece of evidence that likely influenced the French award was a German inventory notebook possessed by the German leader of the patrol who had been captured several days after Johnson’s battle. This notebook listed the number of personnel used in the attack and the losses in both equipment and soldiers they sustained. Unfortunately, this notebook has been lost but is cited in a 1929 book by Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. documenting the heroics of five World War I heroes.

After the war, Johnson was contracted for a series of private speaking engagements about his experience during the war. He was allowed, as are many discharged servicemembers, to wear his uniform at the events. During a speech in St. Louis, Johnson bemoaned the treatment of black soldiers during the war which led army officers to request that he not be allowed to wear his uniform in public. Johnson died in 1929.

After nearly 90 years and with the tireless work of advocates and family, Johnson was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross in 2003. Since then, many new primary sources of the events have been found by staff working for Senators Schumer, Wyden and independent researchers, including the hand-written account of the events by Needham Roberts, Johnson’s partner on sentry duty that evening and the soldier Johnson prevented from being captured as well as an official report from an independent U.S. military officer observing the regiment’s training proficiency at the time. All sources corroborate Johnson’s actions.

According to federal regulations, the Medal of Honor is awarded by the President on behalf of the Congress to someone who has “distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his or her life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States.” The action must be one of personal bravery or self-sacrifice “so conspicuous as to clearly distinguish the individual above his comrades and must have involved risk of life.” Incontestable sources of proof are needed to prove the action and all sources are subject to the same level of scrutiny.

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