

U.S. Senator from Oregon

**Ron Wyden**



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## Wyden Statement on Sgt. Henry Johnson Medal of Honor

Washington, D.C. – Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., today issued the following statement after the announcement that Sgt. Henry Johnson would posthumously receive the Medal of Honor:

**"I am thrilled that Sergeant Johnson has finally received his long overdue Medal of Honor for his heroism in World War I. This award at long last pays proper tribute to a true American hero who served our country so bravely despite the prejudice he and countless others endured at the time in the military as well as at home. His truly distinguished himself and this honor could not be any more well-deserved."**

The administration announced that President Obama will award the Medal of Honor posthumously to Sergeant (then Private) Henry Johnson and present the honor to a representative from the New York National Guard on June 2.

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 – was 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. Wyden has long urged 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.

Wyden and Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) joined with U.S. Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY) in advocating for the Medal of Honor after learning about the issue from 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 service members, 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.