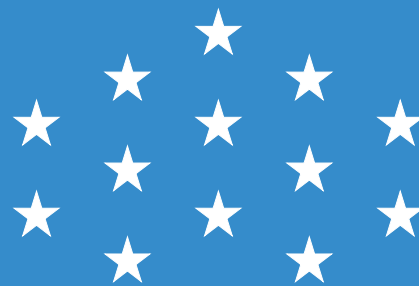


# Sgt. Henry L. Johnson and Sgt. William Shemin

## MEDAL OF HONOR WORLD WAR I



**S**gt. Henry L. Johnson and Sgt. William Shemin, veterans of World War I, were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor by President Barack Obama during a ceremony held 2 June 2015 at the White House. Johnson's award was accepted on his behalf by Command Sgt. Maj. Louis Wilson, the New York National Guard's senior enlisted advisor. Elsie Shemin-Roth and Ina Bass, the daughters of William Shemin, accepted Shemin's award.

Johnson deployed to France's Argonne Forest region with the 369th Infantry Regiment, an all-black unit more famously known as the "Harlem Hellfighters." His award came as a result of his actions 15 May 1918, when a German raiding party of at least a dozen soldiers conducted a night attack on a position he shared with another soldier, Needham Roberts. Johnson and Roberts repelled the attackers with rifles and grenades. When Roberts was rendered unconscious, Johnson fought off the Germans with his knife, refusing to let Roberts be captured by the enemy. He held off the Germans but was wounded twenty-one times during the fight.

For his bravery that night, Johnson was awarded the French Croix de Guerre avec Palme, France's highest award for valor, but received no award from his own government. Returning to the United States, he could not work due to his combat injuries and died in 1929 at a veterans hospital.

Shemin deployed to France with the 47th Infantry Regiment, lying about his age to enlist. His award was for his actions during combat operations 7-9 August 1918 near the Vesle River, southeast of Bazoches, France. Fighting from trenches, U.S. and German forces were separated by less than 150 meters of open space. When several soldiers were wounded trying to cross the area, Shemin

left the relative safety of the trench to attempt their rescue. He did this three times, facing heavy enemy machine gun fire, but carrying his wounded comrades to safety. When his platoon's leadership was attrited by enemy fire, Shemin stepped in and took charge of the platoon, effectively leading the unit until he himself was wounded on 9 August.

President Obama said of the two soldiers, "America is the country we are today because of people like Henry and William—Americans who signed up to serve and rose to meet their responsibilities—and then went beyond. The least we can do is say we know who you are, we know what you did for us. We are forever grateful."

The awards came as a result of years of work by family members and other supporters who felt the two had been discriminated against due to prejudices of that time; Johnson was African-American and Shemin was Jewish. The president recognized those efforts, saying, "Some of

you have worked for years to honor these heroes, to give them the honor they should have received a long time ago. We are grateful that you never gave up. We are appreciative of your efforts."

Johnson and Shemin were also inducted into the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes on 3 June by Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work. Work commented on the length of time it took to approve and present the awards, blaming it on past racism and anti-Semitism. "This ceremony is a reminder that we redress

the prejudices of the past and appropriately honor our nation's heroes," Work said. He added, "It is important that we acknowledge the injustices and mistakes of the past and rightfully honor those who have given so much on behalf of their country."



(Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)  
Sgt. Henry L. Johnson



(Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)  
Sgt. William Shemin