



## 2 NCOs to Be Awarded Medal of Honor for Actions During World War I

*By Pablo Villa*

**C**ommand Sgt. Maj. Louis Wilson will retire next year after 39 years of service to the New York Army National Guard. His career has produced such notable moments as being part of rescue operations in response to various natural disasters, being part of aid missions after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks in New York City, deploying to Iraq for a year in 2004 and, just last year, being named the command sergeant major of the New York National Guard.

But, he says, his accomplishments throughout those nearly four decades pale in comparison to what Sgt. Henry Johnson did one day in 1918.

“I think about myself and my career — I’ve had a few achievements,” Wilson said. “But just looking at Henry Johnson and all he did in a day — my 39 years doesn’t come close.”

What then-Pvt. Johnson did May 15, 1918, during World War I was immediately deemed worthy of France’s highest award for valor — the Croix de Guerre avec Palme. Nearly a century later, his own country will follow suit, posthumously awarding Johnson, who retired as a sergeant, the Medal of Honor during a ceremony Tuesday at the White House. Wilson will accept the award from President Barack Obama on Johnson’s behalf, as he has no surviving family members.

The nation’s highest honor will also be posthumously awarded to Sgt. William Shemin during the same ceremony.

Johnson, who was African-American, will receive the Medal of Honor for his actions to fight off a German raid party using his Bowie knife. He was on night sentry duty with Pvt. Needham Roberts in an area northwest



Sgt. Henry Johnson, of the 369th Infantry Regiment, was awarded the French Croix de Guerre avec Palme on Feb. 12, 1919, for bravery during a battle with German soldiers the previous year. (Photo courtesy of Army News Service)

of Sainte-Menehould, France, between the Tourbe and Aisne rivers. According to information from the White House, the pair came under a surprise attack by a dozen German soldiers.

While under intense fire and despite his own wounds, Johnson kept an injured Roberts from being taken prisoner. He came forward from his position to engage an enemy soldier in hand-to-hand combat. Wielding only a knife and gravely wounded, Johnson continued fighting until the enemy retreated.

Johnson was in France as part of C Company of the 15th New York (Colored) Infantry Regiment, which he joined in June 1917. The all-black National Guard unit would later become the 369th Infantry Regiment — the famed Harlem Hellfighters — part of the 93rd Division, which was ordered to the front lines to fight with the French in 1918. After being awarded the Croix de Guerre in 1919, Johnson died in 1929 without further fanfare. He was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart in 1996 and the Distinguished Service Cross in 2002. But until now, he had been overlooked for the Medal of Honor.

“It’s a good thing. The injustice that was done back then, it’s been overturned,” Wilson said. “Things have changed. We see now that the valor that he displayed, he should’ve been honored. We’re glad he is honored now. There shouldn’t be a difference who you are. We enlist and, no matter who you are, we fight side by side. You learn to take care of each other. That’s what he did, he took care of his battle buddy.”

Wilson said during his early days living and working in the Albany, N.Y., area, it was difficult not to see reminders of Johnson. Drivers make their way along Henry Johnson Boulevard. Children are dropped off at Henry Johnson Charter School. A granite tribute to Johnson sits on the southeast corner of Washington Park near downtown Albany.

“When I first came to post as the command sergeant major of the state of New York, I had heard about Henry Johnson,” Wilson said. “I had to research him. I did a lot of reading and realized he really was a hero.”

While Wilson thought Johnson was deserving of much higher accolades, he never believed he would be a part of the pomp that came with it. He was aware that efforts by various organizations on Johnson’s behalf to award him the Medal of Honor were ongoing, but when he received a phone call three weeks ago from Maj. Gen. Patrick Murphy, New York’s adjutant general, Wilson said he was shocked. Murphy explained that as the command sergeant major of the New York National Guard, it made sense for Wilson to accept the honor on behalf of the long-deceased Guard Soldier.



New York Army National Guard Command Sgt. Maj. Louis Wilson will represent Sgt. Henry Johnson, a World War I Soldier, scheduled to receive a posthumous Medal of Honor on Tuesday during a White House ceremony. (Photo by Master Sgt. Corine Lombardo / Army News Service)

“I was blindsided. I wasn’t expecting that,” Wilson said. “I think it’s a big honor. I’m proud, I’m happy, I’m glad that I’m the one who will represent him and will accept this honor from the president.”

Though the medal is significant, Wilson said it is being awarded to a Soldier who did what all Soldiers should be doing.

“He had a belief,” Wilson said of Johnson. “He wanted to prove himself. He overcame many things to become a Soldier and he overcame that night (of the attack). He was awarded the French’s highest award and to come back here and get nothing? But he proved himself and there is a reward, whether it’s a medal or whether it’s a sense of belonging. I see that in Henry Johnson with the smile that he gave in pictures that we have. I can imagine if he was here today he’d say, ‘What’s the big fuss about? I went over there and did my duty.’ And that’s the way it should be.”

Wilson adds that despite the time that has transpired since Johnson’s heroism and the many social and technological changes, that today’s NCOs can still learn from his actions.

“Live the Army values,” Wilson said. “Do your job, know your job and take care of others. No matter what you do, it’s all about duty and serving. Never give up.

“At the time, he was a private. When you enlist in the service, you’re a private. But you quickly learn. You learn the positions two, three steps ahead of what you are and you grow up quick. That’s the Army. It’s being able to think on your feet and not give up. He never gave up.”

### Shemin takes charge

Shemin was born Oct. 14, 1896, in Bayonne, N.J. He graduated from the New York State Ranger School in 1914, and went on to work as a forester in Bayonne.

Shemin enlisted in the Army on Oct. 2, 1917. Upon completion of basic training at Camp Greene, N.C., he was assigned as a rifleman to G Company, 47th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, which headed to France after merely 17 days of field training.

While serving as a rifleman during the Aisne-Marne Offensive from Aug. 7 to 9, 1918, he left the cover of his platoon’s trench and crossed open space, repeatedly exposing himself to heavy machinegun and rifle fire to rescue the wounded.

After officers and senior noncommissioned officers had become casualties, Shemin took command of the platoon until he was wounded by shrapnel and a machinegun bullet, which pierced his helmet and lodged behind his left ear. He was hospitalized for three months and then was placed on light duty as part of the Army occupation in Germany and Belgium.

For his injuries, he received the Purple Heart and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross on Dec. 29, 1919.



Sgt. William Shemin, right, poses with a fellow Soldier in this undated photo. Shemin will be awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor on Tuesday. (Photo courtesy of Army News Service)

Shemin was honorably discharged in August 1919, and went on to receive a degree from the New York State College of Forestry at Syracuse University. After graduation, he started a greenhouse and landscaping business in Bronx, N.Y., where he raised three children. He died in 1973.

His eldest daughter, Elsie Shemin-Roth of Webster Grove, Mo., began an effort in the early 2000s to give her father a chance at being awarded the Medal of Honor. Her endeavor was spurred by news that a group of Jewish-American World War II veterans were getting their Army Distinguished Service Cross, Navy Cross and Air Force Cross citations reviewed for upgrades due to anti-Semitism. Shemin, who is Jewish, performed actions that were worthy of the Medal of Honor, according to a Distinguished Service Cross recommendation in the family’s possession.

Shemin-Roth’s efforts included contacting the Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America and a congressman for help. Eventually, they saw the passage of the William Shemin Jewish World War I Veterans

Act in 2011, which allowed Shemin's case to be resubmitted for review. Four years later, Shemin-Roth is to receive the Medal of Honor on her father's behalf. He is the first member of the storied 4th Infantry Division to receive the nation's highest honor for actions during World War I.

*The Army News Service contributed to this report.*

### Watch it

- What: Medal of Honor ceremony.
- When, where: 11:15 a.m. EDT Tuesday, White House.
- Of note: The Medal of Honor will be posthumously awarded to Sgt. William Henry Johnson and Sgt. William Shemin for their actions during World War I.
- Live feed: <https://www.dvidshub.net/webcast/6491#.VWh740aOmAM> ■



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