

Waring Cuney

Negroes of New York

A Sketch Of Dorrence Brooks And Henry Johnson

Dorrence Brooks Square located in the Harlem section of New York is the scene of patriotic demonstrations and celebrations of civic and fraternal organizations. It is formed by St. Nicholas avenue on the west, Edgecombe avenue on the east, 136th street on the south, and 137th street on the north.

This plot was dedicated to the memory of Dorrence Brooks, First Class Private, who according to unconfirmed sources, was the first member of the 369th Regiment to fall in line of battle. Private Brooks was a native of New York. He was killed in action on September 28th, 1918, serving in a machine gun battalion. He was twenty-seven years old when he enlisted in 1917. The Dorrence Brooks Post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Dorrence Brooks Apartments, located in Harlem, have also been named in his memory. (1)

Sergeant Henry Johnson, of Albany, New York, was one of the most conspicuous of the World War heroes. His exploit was shared by a company mate, Needham Roberts. For pure bull-dog grit and tigerish fighting, the exploit has seldom been equaled in any war. It resulted in the War Crosses for each with special citation. Across the red and green of Johnson's decoration the golden palm, signifying extraordinary valor, was placed. He was the first private in any race in the American army to get the palm with his Croix de Guerre. (2)

Johnson and Roberts were serving on sentinel duty in

"No Man's Land" when they were attacked by an enemy patrol. A letter to Mrs. Johnson from the regimental commander, Colonel Hayward tells of the exploit,

"We had learned some time ago from German prisoners that the Germans had learned of the regiment of Black Americans in this sector, and the German officers had told their men how easy to combat and capture them it would be. So this raiding party came over, and on the contrary Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts attended strictly to their duties. At the beginning of the attack the Germans fired a volley of bullets and grenades and both of the boys were wounded, your husband three times and Roberts twice, then the Germans rushed the post expecting to make an easy capture. In spite of their wounds, the boys waited coolly and courageously and when the Germans were within striking distance opened fire, your husband with his rifle and Private Roberts from his helpless position on the ground with hand grenades. But the German raiding party came on in spite of their wounded and in a few seconds our boys were at grips with the terrible foe in a desperate hand-to-hand encounter, in which the enemy outnumbered them, ten to one.

"The boys inflicted great loss on the enemy, but Roberts was overpowered and about to be carried away when your husband, who had used up all the cartridges in the magazine of his rifle and had knocked one German down with the butt end of it, drew his bolo from his belt. A bolo is a short heavy weapon carried by the American soldier, with the edge of a razor, the weight of a cleaver and the point of a butcher knife. He rushed to the rescue of his former comrade and fighting desperately, opened with his bolo the head of the German who was throttling Roberts, and turned to the boche who had Roberts by the heel, plunging the bolo into the Germans bowels. . . . Henry laid about him right and left with his heavy knife, and Roberts, released from the grasp of the scoundrels, began again to throw hand grenades and exploded them in their midst; and the Germans doubtless thinking it was a host instead of two brave Colored boys fighting like tigers at bay, picked up their dead and wounded and slunk away, leaving many weapons and part of their shot riddled clothing, and leaving a trail of blood, which we followed at dawn near to their lines. We feel certain that one of the enemy was killed by rifle fire, two by your husband's bolo, one by grenades thrown by Private Roberts and several others grievously wounded. Both boys have received a citation of the French General commanding the splendid French division in which my regiment is now serving and will receive the Croix de Guerre." (3)

On the night of the famous exploit two inexperienced soldiers were about to be placed on sentinel duty in place of Johnson and Roberts. Johnson requested that he and Roberts be permitted to remain on duty because he explained that he anticipated trouble from the enemy that night. So it was at his own request that he became one of the outstanding heroes of the World War. (4) He returned to the United States and died in an Institution. Roberts is alive and well; and is a government employee in New Jersey.

## Bibliography:

The American Negro In The World War  
Emmett J. Scott  
Copyright 1919, By Emmett Scott  
Scott was appointed Special Assistant to the Secretary of War  
and served until the end of the World War.

Amsterdam News  
N.Y. Saturday, May 27, 1939  
Article by A. M. Wendell Malliet.

## Documentation:

Ibid.1, Amsterdam News, May 27, 1939  
Ibid.2, Amsterdam News, May 27, 1939  
Ibid.3, The American Negro In The World War  
Ibid.4, The American Negro In The World War.