

Fillmore

Harry Robinson

Negroes of New York.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles W. Fillmore.  
*and the Organization of the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry*

The military history of Lieut. Col. Charles W. Fillmore is that of a man who served his country in two wars and rose from the rank of a private in the National Guard to the post of Lieut. Colonel.

In 1882, Fillmore enlisted in the Ohio National Guard, the state where he was born. In that corps he attained the rank of major. When the Spanish American War was declared, Fillmore was commissioned a First Lieutenant in the 9th U.S. Volunteer Infantry and served with that regiment in the Cuban campaign under Generals Lawton and Woods. He reached the rank of ~~captain~~ <sup>major</sup>, but contracted yellow fever and was honorably discharged for physical disability in 1899. It took him over a year to recuperate.

After the war he went to Washington D.C. and secured a position in the U.S. Treasury Department, later transferring to the Internal Revenue Service in New York City. In the big city, he was senior captain in the old 15th under Colonel Hayward. From the first organization of that regiment to its war strength in the opening days of American participation in the World War, Fillmore served thru its World War campaign as the 369th A.E.F. He was cited for bravery during the battle of the Champagne and was awarded the Croix de Guerre. Later in the course of the war, he served on the staffs of General Balleau of the 92nd Division and Col. Roberts of the 2370th A.E.F. Entering the war as a commissioned captain he rose to

the post of major. After the war, before his regiment was disbanded, Fillmore was commissioned a Lieut. Colonel in the U.S. Army.

Upon his return from France, Fillmore entered the Tax Commission of New York State office. He worked there and was prominent in the Republican organization of the 19th Assembly District of New York. In 1929, in a hotly contested battle against Assemblyman Grenthal, Fillmore was elected to the post of District Leader. His campaign for leadership was carried on under the demand to have the ~~taxman~~ "authoritative voice" of the colored people "within the councils of the great political parties." He served as district leader and kept his position in the State Auditor's Office until 1933, when he retired. He now lives in Harlem.

Surely the greatest days of a full life must have been those involved in the organization of a Negro Regiment in the hectic days of the opening of America's participation in the Great War.

The core of the regiment was the "old 15th" Infantry of the New York State National Guard which was mobilized on a war basis on April 13, 1917. The officers and the men were encharged with recruiting more to bring the regiment to war strength. This was done mainly on a personal basis, bringing in friends and opening recruiting centers in various spots of Harlem and Brooklyn.

The first training center for the regiment was the armory at 191 Harrison Avenue, Brooklyn. Major Little describes this in his reminiscences as a "delapidated old dance hall and beer

beer garden". A great deal of effort was required to teach the new recruits the elementary principles of discipline and the manual of arms. It was impossible to do this in the armory, merely to begin to form the squads and battalions, give out the uniforms and establish the first principles of an "esprit de corps". After a month of slow recruiting, which became rapidly speeded up when traveling orders were received the regiment left for Camp near Peekskill on May 13, 1917. The regiment left the armory by elevated train thru Brooklyn, changing at Brooklyn Bridge for the Third Avenue Elevated. There it detrained and marched to Park Avenue between 45th and 50th Street to await the contingent from the Harlem Armory at 132nd Street and 7th Avenue. The wait was long and exasperating, but finally the Harlem contingent arrived and the regiment, now numbering 1200 men proceeded on foot to 60th Street and the Hudson River, where their special train took the men to camp.

At camp, nothing had been provided and the first day of the Negro soldiers on their own was spent in setting up tents and organizing a kitchen in a deserted dining parlor. At 1030 PM, supper was finally served, the Colonel personally giving out the food, but there was not enough for all and many soldiers had to be content with dry beans and cold hardtack. Then began the long process of whipping the raw and unruly recruits, mostly Pullman porters, hotel waiters, red caps and apartment house and hotel doormen in the semblance of soldiers.

After two weeks, the 15th Infantry N.G. , which began with no traditions, no education and no friends was able to more than

tolerably drill and march. There was not ~~any~~ even one thoroughly equipped first class officer to organize the force; merely men on the reserve list who in private life were lawyers and other professionals. There was a number of Negro officers, but the main body of officers were white men.

The regiment returned to New York City on May 30th. On July ~~14~~ 15, 1917 it was mustered into the regular army and sent to Camp Whitman, ~~where~~ where it continued its training until August 15th. On that date it was split into parts and sent to guard public works and properties in the New York area.

On October 8th, the regiment was sent to Camp Wadsworth at Spartanburg, South Carolina. The first event of great importance there was the speech which Col. Hayward made to all the assembled men pointing out to them the difference of conditions between the Northern and Southern Negro and asking the men not to frequent establishments where they were not wanted.

Numerous incidents occurred in the southern town of Spartanburg which made the officers lives one of constant settling of fights between the Negro soldiers and the white rowdy elements of the town. On many occasions, white soldiers, billeted at the same camp defended the Negro soldiers who were forbidden to retaliate ~~and~~ to attacks, of which many were of physical violence.

So tense was the atmosphere among the Negro soldiery that one night, when two soldiers failed to report back to camp, a rumor that they had been hung in the courtyard of the police station circulated thru the camp. About 40 to 50 men the next morning, with rifles and marching in perfect military formation under the command of non-commissioned officers went to town to

"investigate" the police station and locate their missing buddies of their bodies and to impose justice. Only the desperate efforts and a fast car used by the commanding Colonel prevented bloodshed.

The two missing men turned up later. They had taken a wrong turn and had passed the night in the fields. After that incident, the commanding general thought it better to remove the Negro soldiery from the Jim Crow town and it was given "secret orders" to leave for France.

The regiment left for New York on October 24th. But it was not until December 14th that it finally got under steam for the battlefields. The transport ship assigned to it suffered in succession a wreck, a fire and a collision. But finally the men moved on arriving in France on December 27th, 1917, one of the first National Guard volunteer contingents to arrive so early.

In France it became the 369th A.E.F. attached to the 16th Division of the French Army.