



A MORE UNBENDING BATTLE

BY

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COMING SPRING, 2009

FROM BASICCIVITAS BOOKS

Chapter 1

Parades

*Over in France there's a game that's played
By all the soldier boys in each brigade
It's called Hunting the Hun
This is how it is done!
First you go get a gun
Then you look for a Hun
Then you start on the run for the son of a gun
You can capture them with ease
All you need is just a little Limburger cheese
Give 'em one little smell
They come out with a yell
Then your work is done
When they start to advance
Shoot 'em in the pants
That's the game called Hunting the Hun!*
—Archie Gottler and Howard E. Rogers, “Hunting the Hun

In the summer of 1916, it was not uncommon to see military parades assembling outside the Lafayette Theater on Seventh Avenue between 131st and 132nd streets in the heart of Harlem's club and theater district. War was in all the papers. It was in the air. It was not our fight, but how could we avoid it? Americans of all races needed to be ready, although it was a war no one could adequately prepare for.

The first parades were relatively motley affairs and served a dual purpose. One was to turn citizens into soldiers. Teaching discipline, obedience, and unit cohesion, the parades forced the men to practice and memorize military behaviors until they became instinctive, following a martial tradition where soldiers fought in formation, on battlefields where organized troops conquered and dispatched disorganized opponents. The war they were preparing for in France was changing all the old rules, but order was still preferable to chaos.

The second purpose was to advertise the regiment, the newly authorized all-black Fifteenth New York National Guard, and to attract recruits to the cause. Marchers assembled outside regimental headquarters, a place often referred to simply as “The Corner.” They were men of color, some still teenagers, others in their forties, waiting beneath the theater's broad marquee or standing out front in the shade of an elm tree dubbed the “Tree of Hope” and thought to be lucky. Some of the marchers wore suits, while others patched together makeshift uniforms. Some were used to wearing the uniforms of doormen, porters, waiters, red caps, theater ushers, and elevator operators. The Lafayette Theater served as their armory. The recruiting office was in the back of a cigar store on the corner of Seventh and 132nd. Some of the men carried broomsticks

instead of rifles. The men with broomsticks were told to march in the middle of the formation, where their lack of proper equipment would be less conspicuous.

The war had begun in 1914 when Gavrilo Princip, one of a group of Sarajevo radicals, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the Austrian throne, and his wife. A month later, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia; Russia came to Serbia's defense; Germany came to Austria's defense and declared war on Russia; Germany entered France, Luxemburg, and Belgium; England came to Belgium's defense; Italy allied itself with Germany; and something that would have seemed impossible twenty years before, an entire continent at war with itself, came to pass. Some were saying that the conflict had started before 1914, when ancient enemies began rattling sabers, manufacturing weapons and ammunition, increasing defense allocations, mobilizing and growing their armies and navies, implementing drafts and mandatory military service, and building railroad lines that could move troops more quickly and in larger numbers over greater distances than ever before. Adversaries watched each other warily for years, calculating the time it would take for a rival to launch an attack. Militarists and worried politicians advocated for greater preparedness, as well as better defensive and offensive capabilities, and governments and countries wheeled in slow motion toward war, forming alliances and signing agreements promising to come to each other's assistance. Treaties meant to deter war by guaranteeing retaliation bound nations to irreversible courses of action once shots were fired, shortening the time between the opening salvo and the point of no return.

The marchers were aware of what people were saying. According to some, the world would not be safe for democracy until the Central powers—Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Bulgaria—had been vanquished. Politically savvy enlistees could have surmised by the summer of 1916 that the world was not safe for monarchies, colonial empires, dynasties, theocracies, or dictatorships either, but democracies and monarchies were abstractions to the men assembled in front of the Lafayette Theater. They had their own personal safety to consider. Transatlantic telegraph cables stretching across the ocean floor from London to Newfoundland carried newspaper reports of the staggering numbers of men killed or wounded in the war.

“Preparedness” was the national cry. Early enlistees (Republican governor Charles Whitman signed the order to form the regiment on June 16, 1916) would have mustered in, despite many Americans' belief that the Great War was not our war. President Woodrow Wilson ran for reelection in 1916 under the banner “he kept us out of war,” a war “with which we have nothing to do.” Although the sinking of the *Lusitania* by German submarines on May 7, 1915—with over one thousand Americans on board and twelve hundred passengers lost, including nonparticipating civilians, women, and children (one way the old rules of war had changed)—had galvanized anti-German sentiment, many during the summer of 1916 still saw the war itself as costly and far off and as someone else's problem, one that might be resolved soon.

To prepare, the enlistees marched from the shade of the Tree of Hope south on Seventh, then right on 131st, past the Libya Café (“The place to dine well. When visiting New York City, make it your first stop—we will make it your best. The gateway to refinement.”), then north on Lenox, past the Schaeffer Furniture Company.

They were teachers, craftsmen, and postmen. They were factory workers, night watchmen, churchgoers, fathers, gamblers, artists, criminals, and musicians. Many of the men marching were recent transplants from the South who had moved north to look for work in the industries ramping up to manufacture and supply war materials to U.S. allies in this “world” war. Some of the men who’d relocated from Louisiana spoke French, which they hoped would serve them if they ever got to France.

About sixty thousand Negroes lived in Manhattan in 1916, with about fifty thousand of them residing in Harlem and the rest primarily in the San Juan Hill area, north of Hell’s Kitchen. Americans of African origin comprised about 12.5 percent of the U.S. population. The “world war” was an Old World war, a dispute primarily among countries Americans had fled in ships a long time before—or not so long before. About one-third of all Americans had been born abroad or were one generation removed. The men of Harlem did not have roots in the Old World—at least, not in that one. Their blood connections tied them to another continent entirely, to Africa, though to what part of that continent, to which region or country, few could say, the particulars of their individual affiliations having been long ago lost or stolen. They had not been born abroad, and most were more than one generation removed. They had what W. E. B. DuBois called a “sense of two-ness.” They knew themselves as Americans and as Negroes, a duality that cried for reconciliation. Their reasons for marching derived in part from that dichotomy, that imperative, and were uniquely their own.

The city’s colored community had hoped to raise its own militia since before the Civil War. In 1911, a group of Harlem’s civic leaders calling itself the Equity Congress appointed Charles Fillmore, a middle-aged black attorney and Treasury Department official, as a provisional colonel with the mandate to establish a regiment. Fillmore had military experience, having served in the Spanish-American War, and was well liked by the Republican Party. The Equity Congress persuaded a white New York assemblyman to sponsor legislation to authorize a regiment, but Gov. John Adams Dix, fearful of losing votes among his white constituency, thwarted their efforts. The state legislature had approved the establishment of a black guard unit as early as 1908, which was also vetoed. Governor Whitman had agreed to let William Hayward, his former campaign manager, form a regiment on the condition that the officers be white.

William Hayward was an ambitious, forty-year-old, white Republican lawyer. A handsome, rock-jawed, transplanted Nebraskan (and son of a U.S. senator from Nebraska), Hayward had risen to the rank of colonel in the Nebraska National Guard and moved his law practice to New York in 1910. The white officers Hayward appointed were of a similarly privileged and politically connected caste, men of social prominence who gave the regiment credibility. This made practical, if not purely military, sense since Hayward’s job initially entailed raising funds from private sources, making speeches at banquets and benefits, and petitioning his personal acquaintances for contributions to pay for the regiment’s uniforms and equipment. For his second in command, he chose a lieutenant colonel named Woodell Pickering. He appointed Maj. Lorillard Spencer Jr. as his adjutant. Spencer was a wealthy, white, portly New Yorker who, with his round wire-rimmed glasses and moustache, bore a striking resemblance to Teddy Roosevelt. Spencer’s mother was a ball-attending socialite, while his father was a rich magazine publisher and clubman with a brownstone on East Eighty-sixth Street, as well as a

mansion in Newport. Hayward also enlisted a senior captain named Arthur W. Little, publisher and editor of *Pearson's Magazine*, where British author H. G. Wells's science fiction novel *War of the Worlds* first appeared in America.

More socially credentialed and politically connected than all of them was a strapping all-American footballer from Harvard named Hamilton Stuyvesant Fish III. The son of a congressman and grandson of a former New York governor, Fish was a founding member of the Military Training Camp Association, a social club whose membership included ex-president Theodore Roosevelt, former army chief of staff Maj. Gen. Leonard Wood, Secretary of War Elihu Root, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and other members of New York's social elite. At the club's facilities in Plattsburgh, New York, young men from "the best families" could play war, fire machine guns and mortars, and partake of military training, learning self-discipline, military tactics, combat strategies, marksmanship, hygiene, virility, and (temporarily) the virtues of celibacy and self-restraint—all the particulars ascribed to the Rooseveltian Rough Rider ideal of manliness. The Military Training Camp Association was, in effect, an extension of the Boy Scouts movement started ten years earlier in England by Lt. Gen. Robert Baden-Powell (Lorillard Spencer Jr. was a disciple of Baden-Powell and one of the founders of Boy Scouting in America), which similarly emphasized preparedness, fraternity, and esprit de corps—though the camp had a deadlier purpose.

Fish was aware that if he hoped to follow in the family tradition and pursue political office after the war, he would need a military record to campaign on. To an extent, all the white officers who signed on with the Fifteenth New York National Guard acted out of self-interest, cognizant of the stature and respect that would accrue to them from military service, apart from any personal commitment to the causes of nationalism, democracy, or racial equality. At the same time, ambitious white men hoping to climb the ranks or gain status through military service would also have been aware that joining a colored regiment was not the fast track or path of least resistance to self-advancement; in fact, serving with the Fifteenth could negatively impact one's standing within the white military establishment. Fish acknowledged in a letter that his situation was "not ideal." Yet, idealism of another sort played a part in his decision: "I am quite proud of my company," he wrote his father. "It is a privilege to fight for America and I'm glad of the opportunities."

Hayward offered to form a colored regiment on the condition that he be appointed colonel, but he also understood that he would not succeed without support from the black community. Thus, contrary to Governor Whitman's mandate, he promised the leadership in Harlem, the politicians, clergymen, and men of prominence who'd advocated for their own regiment, that he would appoint colored men as field officers and keep the command officers who'd enlisted so far: George C. Lacy, formerly of the all-black Eighth Illinois; Col. Charles Fillmore, now demoted to captain, Company B; and forty-one-year-old attorney Napoleon Bonaparte Marshall.

As formidable a personality as his name suggested, Marshall was a welcomed addition to Hayward's officers' cadre. He was a graduate of Howard University, and Harvard Law, as well as a friend of Lorillard Spencer. Marshall had been a track star at Harvard, practiced law first in Massachusetts and then on Wall Street, and married into a family prominent in Harlem society. Before the war, he had spoken out against the Booker T. Washington school of acquiescent self-effacement and inveighed against Jim

Crow laws and other forms of white hegemony. More usefully to Hayward's purposes, however, he'd advocated in military courts on behalf of black soldiers and could, if called upon, serve as a bridge between white officers and aggrieved black personnel. He was a Democrat who favored Wilson over Roosevelt, but he believed blacks could demonstrate their value as citizens through military service and had, in fact, suggested forming a colored regiment before Hayward took command.

Reactions to those early parades of 1916 were mixed. For many in Harlem, a white-led regiment was better than no regiment at all. Some whites would have preferred no regiment to one led by either whites or blacks. For a portion of black men of Harlem, the idea of doing nothing was preferable to joining a fight of catastrophic proportions between white men an ocean away. African American journalist James Weldon Johnson reported a conversation overheard in a Harlem barbershop: One man asked another if he intended to join the war effort. "The Germans ain't done nothing to me," the second man shrugged in reply. "And if they have, I forgive 'em."

As a recruiting tool, the parades were meant to demonstrate the Fifteenth's viability, attract the curious, and persuade the intrigued. Hayward needed to enlist two thousand volunteers to reach combat strength. Some of the volunteers were celebrities recognizable to young men watching from the sidewalk. One celebrity was Spottswood "Spots" Poles, born December 9, 1887, and dubbed "The Black Ty Cobb." Though bowlegged and small of stature, standing only five foot seven and weighing 165 pounds, he was one of the fastest men in the Negro leagues and in 1911 stole forty-one bases in the sixty games he played with the New York Lincoln Giants. In 1914, he batted .487, and in exhibition games against white major league teams, his batting average was .610.

Another celebrity was George "Kid" Cotton, perhaps less recognizable but hard to miss. A giant who smoked cigars and wore his bowler hat cocked at a jaunty angle, Kid Cotton was a professional boxer originally from Pittsburgh, who for a time served as exiled heavyweight champion Jack Johnson's sparring partner. Cotton's record was only so-so, but the fact that he fought Jack Johnson would have given him considerable prestige.

The early parades met with only limited success. The hope was that young men watching from the sidewalk would see a procession, ask a few questions, and perhaps even follow it back to the Lafayette Theater and the recruiting office. Before television or radio, parades were a way to get the word out, but a parade alone, particularly a ragtag and haphazard one, was not enough to make the residents of Harlem run to their windows to see what the commotion was all about. For that, Hayward needed music loud enough to carry down the city streets. He needed a marching band to lead the parades. The first band he managed to slap together was as unimpressive as his soldiers carrying broomsticks, a honk-and-bleat assemblage that did little to build the regiment's reputation. That all changed when Hayward convinced a man named James Reese Europe to form and lead a new band, one that would perform at benefits and represent the Fifteenth as a regiment to be proud of.

Jim Europe was a big man in every sense of the word. Of imposing physical stature (at least when he wasn't standing next to George Cotton), he was also one of the most celebrated and respected figures in Harlem. Born in 1880 in Mobile, Alabama, he

was raised in Washington, D.C., by a musical family, his father an Episcopal minister and postal worker, his mother a piano teacher, and his siblings both musicians. John Phillip Sousa, “The March King,” lived nearby. It was an era before recorded music and radio, when every town had a brass band that served as the main public entertainment, playing parades, fairs, and picnics.

After his father died, James Europe followed his older brother John to Harlem, seeking musical opportunities as a way to support his mother and sister. He watched his brother play in piano carving contests at Barron Wilkin’s Little Savoy on West Thirty-fifth Street with Eubie Blake, Willie “The Lion” Smith, and others, and he spent time at the Marshall Hotel on West Fifty-third, where all the prominent black musicians hung out. It was there that in 1903 he met a man looking to hire black musicians to play at a birthday party for Rodman Wanamaker, son of Philadelphia department store millionaire John Wanamaker. Jim Europe put together a quartet, played the party, and found he had a genius for booking society gigs (“gig” a term Europe coined, according to Eubie Blake), organizing small ensembles, and finding wealthy patrons looking to spice up their private dances with black musicians and their exotic syncopations. He played the kind of music his white employers wanted to hear—minstrel and burnt-cork music, plantation songs (“Oh, the good old days are pass’d and gone,/I sigh for them in vain;/I want to see the cotton fields./And the dear old home again”), and “coon songs”—at one point forming a minstrel group with a Marshall Hotel musician named Ernest Hogan, who wrote “All Coons Look Alike to Me” (“And now ma honey gal is gwine to quit me/Yes she’s gone and drove this coon away”).

Jim Europe began his musical career as a classically trained violinist. His ambition was to discover and create authentic African American music, and he knew plantation and coon songs were not it. His personal tastes drew him to rag, to what would come to be called the blues, to the energy of cutting contests, the cabaret scene, and popular song.

In 1910, when 125 musicians at the Marshall Hotel wanted to form a union of their own (they were excluded from the white unions), they elected Jim Europe president and called themselves the Clef Club. Europe’s reputation as a leader of musicians got a boost when he organized a concert at Carnegie Hall in May 1912 to benefit a music school for African American children. The sold-out, standing-room-only performance included twelve upright pianists playing ragtime on back-to-back pianos and garnered standing ovations and rave reviews.

Society gigs soon became more numerous and more lucrative. The Clef Club orchestras played Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond, and Washington, D.C. In 1913, Jim married Willie Angrom Starke, a woman prominent in Harlem’s high society, but he continued to see a chorus girl named Bessie Simms on the side. That year he also became the band leader for Vernon and Irene Castle, an internationally acclaimed white dance team popular for adapting and cleaning up “vulgar” black dances, the fox-trot, the Grizzly Bear, the Texas Tommy, and even the tango, a dance deemed so decadent that it was banned from the 1914 Yale junior prom. With the Castles (who hired him on the spot after hearing his music at a private party), Europe played in better and better venues—the Palace Theater, Hammerstein’s Victoria Theater in Times Square, Fifth Avenue hotel ballrooms, Boston’s Copley Hall, Washington, D.C.’s New Willard Hotel for President Woodrow Wilson’s daughter Eleanor—as well as at tea dances, society dances in

Newport, and private functions in Saratoga or the Hamptons for some of the wealthiest people in America with last names everybody knew, like Vanderbilt, Astor, Gould, and Stuyvesant Fish.

As a band leader, Jim Europe made sure his musicians were disciplined, dressed in tuxedos, and remained on their best behavior, though they still had to enter through the back door, eat in the kitchen, and occasionally use an upright piano when a Steinway grand was available but covered with a tablecloth, topped with flowers in a vase. Jim Europe knew mistreatment and suffered indignities, but he took the high road, refusing to let himself be reduced or diminished. When a member of the staff at one society gig served him soup that tasted like dishwater, Europe swallowed in silence.

On some Sunday afternoons, Jim Europe would take a train to the Castles' country estate in Manhasset to play parlor music with his employers. A genuine friendship developed—as did a mutual respect. On April 8, 1914, the famous Castles agreed to appear before a benefit Jim Europe organized at the Manhattan Casino, where Vernon and Irene would perform sanitized versions of black dances for an audience of twenty-five hundred black people, many of whom knew the unsanitized versions. The Castles had a palpable charisma, a star quality. An idealized, modern (white) male, Vernon started a fashion trend by wearing a wristwatch instead of carrying a pocket watch, while Irene, rail thin, graceful, and metropolitan, embodied the New Woman. Vernon once fined a white member of the Castle's dance company \$50 for using the word "nigger." When in October 1914 the Castles went into production on Broadway in a new Irving Berlin musical, *Watch Your Step*, they took Jim Europe, although he was later cut from the show (as was a young comedian named W. C. Fields) for missing a rehearsal after, according to one report, "hearing the siren call of a woman in Chicago." His reputation was nevertheless secure, a name to be spoken along with the likes of Scott Joplin or Paul Robeson.

Jim Europe's decision to volunteer for the Fifteenth National Guard was in part informed by his friend Vernon Castle's decision to join the war effort after the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915. A British citizen and a celebrity, Castle could have done his bit simply by entertaining the troops, but he wanted to do more than dance while others fought and died. Walking away from the successful run of *Watch Your Step*, Castle paid his own way to Newport News, Virginia, to learn how to fly, even though aviators in the air over France had a life expectancy of about a month. The dancing Castles gave a farewell performance on December 15, 1915, at the Hippodrome in front of five thousand people, after which Vernon Castle enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps for service in France.

Jim Europe's decision to enlist was also informed by a belief that Harlem needed a strong institution for the training of young men. Europe was something of a social activist, helping in 1908 to form a group called "The Frogs" with the intention of uniting black actors, artists, writers, and scientists to a common purpose. Later, in 1912, Europe wrote a march called "The Strength of a Nation" for the proposed guard unit, long before William Hayward's involvement carried the idea to fruition. Yet, he was first and foremost a musician, laboring for equal treatment and equal pay for black performers and composers, saying, "I have done my best to put an end to this discrimination, but I found that it was no use. The music world is controlled by a trust, and the Negro must submit to its demands or fail to have his compositions produced. I am not bitter about it. It is, after

all, but a small portion of the price my race must pay in its at times almost hopeless fight for a place in the sun. Some day it will be different and justice will prevail.”

In the summer of 1916, there were nights when Europe had fifteen bands playing at the same time, and he had to rush from club to hall to club to conduct a tune or two at each. A man of ambition, he had big plans and big dreams: he hoped to establish a national Negro orchestra, to write and produce Broadway musicals with all-black casts.

On September 19, at age thirty-five, he put those dreams on hold and joined the regiment. Using his formidable powers of organization and persuasion to recruit other members of the band, he brought in experienced bandmaster Eugene Mikell as his assistant and pulled in ringers: Ila White on bugle and Frank Debroit from Chicago on cornet. Europe traveled to Puerto Rico to round up men to supplement his horn section, bringing in thirteen members of Manuel Tizol’s band, the Jolly Boys, recording artists on the Victor label. From Charleston, South Carolina’s famous Jenkins Orphanage (where Mikell had formerly given musical training to its homeless “black lambs” as young as age seven), he enlisted Amos Gilliard on trombone and a pair of unrelated young drummers named Steven and Herbert Wright, who nevertheless became known as the “Percussion Twins.” Europe intended to create a military band the likes of which the world had never known, a venture which Colonel Hayward whole-heartedly supported, even securing private funding to help Europe equip his band members. Marching would have reminded Jim Europe of the cadet drill teams he marched with in high school and the Sousa-led U.S. Marine Corps Marching Band he had heard in Washington, D.C. He would have felt at home with this music, but with the jazzola man’s sensibility, where home is just the place you start from, before you take the music outside and see where it can lead you.

There was a market as well for songs about the war. The national mood was changing, with George M. Cohen’s “Over There” challenging Al Bryan and Al Piantadosi’s “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier” for its position as the most popular song in America. Everybody was writing war songs, including Archie Grotler, who’d written “Hunting the Hun,” as well as other popular novelty songs like “Oogie Oogie Wa Wa’ Means ‘I Wanna Mama’ to an Eskimo,” “Would You Rather Be a Colonel with an Eagle on Your Shoulder or a Private with a Chicken on Your Knee?” and “Mammy’s Chocolate Soldier” (“Come lay your kinky head on Mammy’s shoulder/Don’t you cry, you’re Mammy’s chocolate soldier!”).

With Jim Europe on the roster, others soon followed. Among the first was Europe’s friend and fellow musician Noble Sissle. Born in Indiana, the slender and bespectacled son of a Methodist minister was a singer with a beautiful baritone voice and something of a refined sensibility compared to Eubie Blake, their friend and business partner, who had played piano in brothels and clubs where Sissle would have felt out of place. The same age as Jim Europe, Blake deemed himself too old to join the regiment and agreed to stay behind and run the business while Jim and Noble were away. Europe joined as a private in a machine gun company but soon became a sergeant, then a lieutenant, appointing Sissle his drum major.

By July 15, Hayward had the two thousand men he needed, men from all walks of life, men of all ages. Some had already served under arms and were perhaps past their fighting prime, including forty-two-year-old Pvt. Jasper Dorsey, a thirteen-year veteran, forty-nine-year-old Pvt. Robert Miller, and forty-five-year-old Sgt. James H. McCoy, all

from the Twenty-fourth Infantry; Pvt. Henry Raymond and Pvt. John Thomas, both forty years of age, from the Tenth Cavalry; forty-two-year-old Pvt. Frank Johnson from the Twenty-fifth; and forty-one-year-old Pvt. John Shaw from the Eighth Illinois. Kids joined too, many signing up after the Selective Service Act passed on May 18, 1917—better to volunteer to serve with men from your own hometown than to get drafted and serve with strangers. Fresh-faced eighteen-year-olds like Harry Powell, Walter Williams, Ivan Hudson, and James Jackson were probably awestruck to serve in the same machine gun company as Big Jim Europe. A boy named Hannibal Davis joined on September 20, 1916, claiming to be eighteen when he was in fact only fifteen. Arthur Little described other men as giants (and chose them as his personal bodyguards for that reason): a Sergeant Giles; a Sergeant Gaillard, who had already crossed the Atlantic twice and been sunk twice by German warships; and a Sergeant Bayard, who, according to Little, had been acquitted on murder charges three separate occasions, each time on grounds of self-defense. Said to have his own private police unit tasked to follow him around and nip any violence in the bud, Bayard was nonetheless a “wonderful soldier, leader of men, quiet . . . gentlemanly in manner of speech, and well-educated.”

There was Pvt. G. J. Williams of Company A, a Brooklynite from 461 Carlton Avenue; Pvt. Herbert White from 2 West 137th Street in Harlem; and Pvt. John Graham, who worked as a shipping clerk at 1667 Broadway. Pvt. James Turpin believed democracy was worth fighting for, and Pvt. John A. Jamieson wrote poems. Peter Sands was a gambler of much skill. Thirty-three-year-old Pvt. Lionel Rogers belonged to Company L, Pvt. William Jackson was eager to kill Huns, and the father of Pvt. James Henry Jackson from Huntington, Long Island, had worked on whaling ships.

There was Needham Roberts of 249 Church Street, Trenton, New Jersey, a graduate of Lincoln Elementary, then a high school dropout who worked as a hotel bellhop and a clerk in a drugstore. His father ministered at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Mt. Holly. Roberts, like Hannibal Davis, was turned down the first time he tried in 1916 to join while underage, so he stole some money from his father, took a train to New York, lied about his age again, and successfully enlisted.

There was Horace Pippin, a shy, pious country boy born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, but raised in Goshen, New York, by his mother, Harriet. As a child, Pippin would rather draw than do his schoolwork. The pair moved when Horace was ten to Middletown, New York, where at fourteen Pippin hired on with a farmer, who offered to send him to art school. Pippin had to support his mother and rejected the offer, working instead in a coal yard, then in a feed store and as a porter at a hotel. When his mother died in 1911, Pippin moved to Paterson, New Jersey, took a job packing furniture for shipping at the Fidelity Storage House, then found work as a molder for a company that made steel brake shoes. In March 1917, he took a ferry from Hoboken and signed his name to the muster roll, bringing with him notebooks, pencils, and crayons.

There was Elmer McCowan, a New Yorker from 669 Lenox Avenue, and there was William Butler, an elevator operator from Salisbury, Maryland. There was Henry Johnson, a baggage handler and porter at the train station in Albany, born in Winston-Salem in 1889, small of stature but tough, not inclined to back down from a fight. One story said that Henry Johnson was playing craps with his fellow redcaps on a blanket at the train depot and vowed that he was going to jump on a train, go down to Harlem, and enlist if he made his number.

Some men joked, “If it wasn’t for that damn band, I wouldn’t be in this army.”
But for many, the words Frederick Douglass spoke in 1863 still resonated:

“Let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S.; let him get an eagle on his buttons and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned his right to citizenship.”