



The following capsule history of the 372nd Infantry regiment has been compiled by Richard Ford and Jim Ball. It is the result of over 15 years of in depth research. It is periodically updated as new research merits.

The 372nd Infantry was a racially segregated U.S. Army regiment, which served as part of the French 157th Division (Red Hand Division) during World War I. It was made up of National Guard units from: Washington D.C. (1st Separate Battalion - the FIRST National Guard unit [of any race] to muster into Federal service, March 25, 1917 - Companies A, B, C and D); Ohio (9th Separate Battalion - Companies E, F, G, H); Maryland (1st Separate Company - served as the mounted section of the 104th Ammunition Train, 29th Div., Oct. - Dec., 1917 [predating the integration of the U.S. Army by 31 years] - Company I); Tennessee (Separate Infantry Company G -Company K); Massachusetts (Company L, 6th Infantry – the sole black company in an otherwise all-white regiment, a number of whom were combat veterans of the Spanish-American War - Company L); and Connecticut (1st Separate Company - Company M)., as well as approximately 250 draftees from Michigan and Wisconsin. Headquarters, Machine Gun, and Supply companies were formed from men taken from the line companies, and the nucleus of the Medical Detachment came from the DC and Ohio Battalions.

The National Guard units which were the nucleus of the 372nd were the oldest black outfits in the country, with roots traced back to the Civil War. The history of these units includes membership of such men as Major Christian A. Fleetwood (Civil War Congressional Medal of Honor recipient) and Lt. Col. Charles Young (the highest ranking black officer in the Regular Army in WW1, and a veteran of the Indian and Spanish-American Wars). Company L, 6th Massachusetts Infantry was the only black State Volunteer unit to see combat in the Spanish-American War.

The 372nd was organized under the command of Colonel Glendie B. Young (formerly of the 3rd Infantry, DCNG) in January of 1918 at Camp Stuart, Virginia. The regiment was made up of black enlisted and NCO's with black officers in the line companies and white officers in the support companies and on the Headquarters Staff. It was part of the provisional 93rd Division, which also included the 369th (15th New York Inf.), 370th (8th Illinois Inf.), and 371st Infantry ('National Army' draftees) regiments. The division was never completed and, in fact, consisted only of these four infantry regiments. In France these regiments were distributed to different French divisions, apart from one another. Due to continued pressure from the French government for the U.S. to provide troops to bolster their depleted ranks, Gen. Pershing relented and gave over the

incomplete 93rd. This is the only instance in history where American troops were officially authorized by the government to serve in the armed forces of another nation.

On March 30, 1918, the 372nd left Newport News, Virginia for France aboard the U.S.S. Susquehanna. It landed at St. Nazaire, France on the evening of April 13, 1918. The next morning, 1st Lieut. Arrington S. Helm became the first black Chaplain to set foot on French soil. On April 18th the regiment was assigned to the French XIII Army Corps, and on the 22nd embarked for the training center near Givry-en-Argonne.

At this time, the 371st and 372nd were reorganized according to French tables of organization and re-equipped with French gear. All American issue equipment was exchanged for its French equivalent. The men received French rifles and bayonets, helmets, gas masks, infantry equipment, machine guns, and pistols. They also began to draw French rations (with extra sugar substituted for the Poilu's normal wine ration). The only item of American issue that was to be retained was the U.S. Army uniform. After experience in combat, though, it was not uncommon find officers and NCO's with American issue pistols and revolvers, which were more potent than the French issue. Also, enlisted men were often seen wearing a mixture of French and American equipment - especially helmets, canteens and gas masks.

On June 6, 1918, the 372nd and 371st were assigned as an organic part of the 157th "Red Hand" Division, which was commanded by General Mariano F. J. Goybet. The division also included the French 333rd Infantry, 2nd Chasseurs d'Afrique (Moroccan cavalry), and 134th and 236th regiments of Artillery. The Red Hand Division had a long and glorious history in the French Army. They were among the divisions which had held the line at Verdun against vastly superior German numbers and were mauled badly enough that they had to be deactivated and re-organized.

The symbol of the 157th Division was a blood red handprint, which, along with the Stars and Stripes, was displayed on the divisional Tricolor flag. At war's end, General Goybet presented this flag to the 372nd. The National and Regimental flags of the 372nd do, however, still exist and are part of the collection of the State Archives of Ohio.

The 'Red Hand' was also worn as the divisional shoulder sleeve insignia by the men of the 371st and 372nd until their return to American command. At this time it was replaced with the more familiar 'Adrian Helmet' emblem, which was used by the 93rd for the remainder of its existence.

The French were very glad to receive these men and treated them with kindness and respect. This was something that blacks did not normally receive in the American Army. After they had shared their first day of fighting, the French officers began to praise the men of the 372nd for having performed so well under some of the worst combat conditions. This acclaim continued for the unit's entire time of service with the French. The American General Headquarters received many telegrams from General Goybet applauding these men. The General [Goybet] could not understand why the U. S. Army treated the black troops so badly.

In early July, Col. Herschel Tupes of the Regular Army (author of the 1906 Manual of the Bayonet) replaced Col. Young. In early September, after a "Court of Elimination" had been held, Col. Tupes was to order 72 of 76 black officers transferred out of the regiment and replaced with whites. Tupes did this because he believed black officers to be incompetent and felt that they were more likely to fraternize with the troops than to lead them. Most of the officers he replaced were experienced officers who had come from the four Regular Army (9th & 10th Cavalry and 24th & 25th Infantry) regiments, the National Guard, or the Officer Reserve Corps. Many of these officers had been with their companies for 20 years or more. Some were even combat veterans. The four remaining black officers were the two Chaplains and two Dentists.

In return, the regiment mostly received recent R.O.T.C. and S.A.T.C. graduates whose only military experience was their all too brief period of training. The regiment received orders to proceed to the offensive sector before most of the white officers were in place. The remaining black officers were removed from the column on the first afternoon of the march. The white officers assumed their new posts while the regiment was in transit, with some actually arriving only a day or two before the start of offensive action.

In their first nine days of fighting in the Meuse-Argonne sector, the 372nd can be credited with progressing through 4.8 miles of heavily organized defenses. In the process they took 600 enemy prisoners, captured 15 heavy guns, 20 Minenwerfers, and approximately 150 machine guns, as well as securing an enormous quantity of engineering supplies and artillery ammo.

These men kept up the hard fighting throughout their involvement in the war. They were every bit as gallant and effective as their more famous comrades in the 369th (formerly 15th New York Infantry). During the Meuse-Argonne Offensive these two regiments met when the 369th relieved the 372nd near Sechault on September 29, 1918. Every regiment of the 93rd Division had an excellent combat record and consistently received high praise from the French divisions to which they were assigned.

The 372nd played a key role in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive and suffered casualties of 500 men killed, wounded, or gassed in action. They fought gallantly near Verdun, at Bussy Farm (where all officers of Co. I were either killed or wounded), and Sechault to name a few of their accomplishments. Two men of the regiment, Corporals Cilfton Merrimon (later Sgt.) and Clarence Van Allen earned an extraordinary triple award, consisting of the Distinguished Service Cross, the Medaille Militaire (France's highest decoration), and the Croix de Guerre with palm. The mascot of 1st battalion a dog known as Sgt Helen Kaiser was the first American Dog to cross enemy lines, was gassed twice and also awarded a croix De guerre.

It is truly amazing how Black combat troops performed so well when they were fighting for a country that didn't even consider them first class citizens. They faced racial tensions at home, in the army, and even overseas with the American Expeditionary Force. It takes a special kind of person to deal with this type of stress in daily living and maintain stability and consistency in combat. These men simply refused to give up-no matter what task was put before them.

