

Veterans Legacy Program Curricular Materials

African Americans In WWI – Overcoming Discrimination

Grade(s):

9th, 10th, 11th, or 12th

Time (minutes):

3 or 4 – 45 minute class periods

Lesson Overview:

Students will be able to explain the challenges faced by African American troops during World War I. Students will also be able to describe the accomplishments of African American troops both at home and in France during World War I, with focus on the “Harlem Hellfighters”

Relevant Social Studies Standards:

SS.912.A.4.8 Compare the experiences Americans (African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, women, conscientious objectors) had while serving in Europe.

SS.912.A.4.5 Examine causes, course, and consequences of United States involvement in World War I.

Required Materials:

- Copies of the article (either printed or online), [“Fighting For Respect: African-American Soldiers in WWI”](#)
- Access to the YouTube video [“Henry Johnson And The Harlem Hellfighters I WHO DID WHAT IN WW1?”](#)
- Copies of the article (either printed or online), [“One Hundred Years Ago, The Harlem Hellfighters Bravely Led the U.S. Into WWI”](#)
- Plain white copy paper (couple sheets per student)
- Crayons, markers, colored pencils
- [UCF VLP: Biography of Will Todd](#)
- [UCF VLP: Biography of Riley Wright](#)
- [UCF VLP: Biography of John D. Watkins](#)
- Article: [“African American Life in 1916”](#)

Learning Objectives:

Students will be investigating the challenges faced by our African American servicemembers during World War I. At the end of the lesson, students should be able to describe the difficulties faced and how the servicemembers overcame those challenges.

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Special Vocabulary:

- Meuse-Argonne (battle)
- Oise-Aisne (battle)
- Porter

Procedure:

1. Bell work – What challenges did African Americans face in 1917?
 - a. Have students put their answers on sticky notes and put them on the board (or have them come to the white board and write down their answer)
 - b. After every student has had a chance to write on the board, discuss their answers.
 - i. Sticky notes are recommended so students can write down thoughts, and then put their answers into categories like “Lack of Job Opportunities,” etc.. Students should create categories, then go through each sticky note, organizing each answer into one of these broad categories. Categories can be diverse. Examples can include: Education, Jobs, Discrimination, Racism, Overcoming Obstacles, etc.
2. Once finished with part 1, remind students of the climate of the United States in 1917 towards African Americans. (For context, teachers can either reference or have students read [“African American Life in 1916”](#))
 - a. Give them the article “Fighting for Respect: African-American Soldiers in WWI.” This is a lengthy article, but a very interesting read. Either print the document so that students can annotate as they go, or have digital copies available for each student. Have them read the article through to its entirety.
 - b. After the first reading, have them, working with a shoulder partner, go back through the article using different colored highlighters highlighting the areas that fit into the categories we developed during bell work. Each category gets its own color.
 - i. For example, if there were a category for discrimination, then students would want to make sure they highlighted the fact that African Americans could not serve in the Marines and had very limited positions in the Navy and Coast Guard.
 - c. After the students have had a chance to make these highlights, have them make a master list of each notation on a sheet of paper.
 - i. Optional – create a class master list so that everyone has the same idea. This gives the students time to discuss why certain things fit better into one category over another.
 - d. Emphasize the theme of “overcoming obstacles.”

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- i. Be sure to emphasize the idea that African Americans saw military service in WWI as a means of gaining greater rights, protections, and equality. Even though they were oppressed living in the U.S. under Jim Crow, African Americans fought in the war with distinction, and sought to prove that they were deserving of equality with white Americans.
 1. Optional: Ask students to discuss their understanding of African American life in this period. Ask students why they think African Americans wanted to fight in the war.
- e. Show the video next. *Henry Johnson And The Harlem Hellfighters I WHO DID WHAT IN WW1?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4dirfiokh0>
- f. Next, have students read the article), *One Hundred Years Ago, The Harlem Hellfighters Bravely Led the U.S. Into WWI* <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/one-hundred-years-ago-harlem-hellfighters-bravely-led-us-wwi-180968977/>
- g. Option 1: Have a Socratic Seminar about the article. Help facilitate the conversation about how different life was for an African American in the US and what they accomplished in WWI. The goal is for students to realize that even though life was tough in the US, these African Americans were going to serve their country proudly, no matter what obstacles they were up against.
 - i. Distribute the VLP biographies of Will Todd, Riley Wright, and John Watkins evenly amongst the students. These can be accessed digitally, or distributed in a class set.
 1. First, have one or two students for each describe each veteran, and summarize their experiences.
 2. Next, have students include the experiences of these individual veterans into the larger historical context discussed in the previous readings.
 - a. Ask: How did the experiences of your veteran relate to the other readings? What themes can you see among each veteran's experiences?
- h. Option 2: Have a class discussion of the article and then have students create a postage stamp honoring the WWI African American veterans. On the front of the stamp students can draw a picture or symbol representing a specific event or person mentioned in the article. Then on the back of the stamp, the student must explain why they chose the symbols they did or explain why they chose the person they did. Why was this person or event important enough for the US to issue a postage stamp about it?