

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2015*

**Remarks on Presenting Posthumously the Medal of Honor to Private Henry Johnson and Sergeant William Shemin**

*June 2, 2015*

*The President.* Good morning, everybody. Please be seated.

*Audience members.* Good morning.

*The President.* Welcome to the White House. Nearly a hundred years ago, a 16-year-old kid from the Midwest named Frank Buckles headed to Europe's western front. An ambulance driver, he carried the wounded to safety. He lived to see our troops ship off to another war in Europe and one in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan. And Frank Buckles became a quietly powerful advocate for our veterans and remained that way until he passed away 4 years ago, America's last surviving veteran of World War I.

On the day Frank was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery, Vice President Biden and I went to pay our respects. And we weren't alone. Americans from across the country came out to express their gratitude as well. They were of different ages and different races, some military, some not. Most had never met Frank. But all of them braved a cold winter's day to offer a final tribute to a man with whom they shared a powerful conviction: that no one who serves our country should ever be forgotten.

We are a nation, a people, who remember our heroes. We take seriously our responsibilities to only send them when war is necessary. We strive to care for them and their families when they come home. We never forget their sacrifice. And we believe that it's never too late to say thank you. That's why we're here this morning.

Today America honors two of her sons who served in World War I, nearly a century ago. These two soldiers were roughly the same age, dropped into the battlefields of France at roughly the same time. They both risked their own lives to save the lives of others. They both left us decades ago, before we could give them the full recognition that they deserved. But it's never too late to say thank you. Today we present America's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor, to Private Henry Johnson and Sergeant William Shemin.

I want to begin by welcoming and thanking everyone who made this day possible: family, friends, admirers. Some of you have worked for years to honor these heroes, to give them the honor they should have received a long time ago. We are grateful that you never gave up. We are appreciative of your efforts.

As a young man, Henry Johnson joined millions of other African Americans on the Great Migration from the rural South to the industrial North, a people in search of a better life. He landed in Albany, where he mixed sodas at a pharmacy, worked in a coal yard and as a porter at a train station. And when the United States entered World War I, Henry enlisted. He joined one of only a few units that he could: the all-Black 369th Infantry Regiment. The Harlem Hellfighters. And soon, he was headed overseas.

At the time, our military was segregated. Most Black soldiers served in labor battalions, not combat units. But General Pershing sent the 369th to fight with the French Army, which accepted them as their own. Quickly, the Hellfighters lived up to their name. And in the early hours of May 15, 1918, Henry Johnson became a legend.

His battalion was in Northern France, tucked into a trench. Some slept, but he couldn't. Henry and another soldier, Needham Roberts, stood sentry along no man's land. In the predawn, it was pitch black and silent. And then, a click, the sound of wire cutters.

A German raiding party—at least a dozen soldiers, maybe more—fired a hail of bullets. Henry fired back until his rifle was empty. Then he and Needham threw grenades. Both of them were hit. Needham lost consciousness. Two enemy soldiers began to carry him away while another provided cover, firing at Henry. But Henry refused to let them take his brother-in-arms. He shoved another magazine into his rifle. It jammed. He turned the gun around and swung it at one of the enemy, knocking him down. Then, he grabbed the only weapon he had left, his Bolo knife, and went to rescue Needham. Henry took down one enemy soldier, then the other. The soldier he'd knocked down with his rifle recovered, and Henry was wounded again. But armed with just his knife, Henry took him down too.

And finally, reinforcements arrived, and the last enemy soldier fled. As the Sun rose, the scale of what happened became clear. In just a few minutes of fighting, two Americans had defeated an entire raiding party. And Henry Johnson saved his fellow soldier from being taken prisoner.

Henry became one of our most famous soldiers of the war. His picture was printed on recruitment posters and ads for Victory War Stamps. Former President Teddy Roosevelt wrote that he was one of the bravest men in the war. In 1919, Henry rode triumphantly in a victory parade. Crowds lined Fifth Avenue for miles, cheering this American soldier.

Henry was one of the first Americans to receive France's highest award for valor. But his own Nation didn't award him anything—not even the Purple Heart, though he had been wounded 21 times. Nothing for his bravery, though he had saved a fellow soldier at great risk to himself. His injuries left him crippled. He couldn't find work. His marriage fell apart. And in his early thirties, he passed away.

Now, America can't change what happened to Henry Johnson. We can't change what happened to too many soldiers like him, who went uncelebrated because our Nation judged them by the color of their skin and not the content of their character. But we can do our best to make it right. In 1996, President Clinton awarded Henry Johnson a Purple Heart. And today, 97 years after his extraordinary acts of courage and selflessness, I'm proud to award him the Medal of Honor.

We are honored to be joined today by some very special guests: veterans of Henry's regiment, the 369th. Thank you, to each of you, for your service. And I would ask Command Sergeant Major Louis Wilson of the New York National Guard to come forward and accept this medal on Private Johnson's behalf.

*[At this point, Lt. Cmdr. Jillian C. Malzone, USCG, Coast Guard Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal, assisted by Maj. Wesley N. Spurlock III, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President.]*

*The President.* Growing up in Bayonne, New Jersey, William Shemin loved sports: football, wrestling, boxing, swimming. If it required physical and mental toughness, if it made your heart pump, your muscles ache, he was all in. *[Laughter]* As a teenager, he even played semi-pro baseball. So when America entered the war and posters asked if he was tough enough, there was no question about it, he was going to serve. Too young to enlist? No problem. He puffed his chest and lied about his age. *[Laughter]* And that's how William Shemin joined the 47th Infantry Regiment, 4th Division, and shipped out for France.

On August 7, 1918, on the western front, the Allies were hunkered down in one trench, the Germans in another, separated by about 150 yards of open space, just a football field and a half. But that open space was a bloodbath. Soldier after soldier ventured out, and soldier after soldier was mowed down. So those still in the trenches were left with a terrible choice: die trying to rescue your fellow soldier or watch him die, knowing that part of you will die along with him.

William Shemin couldn't stand to watch. He ran out into the hell of no man's land and dragged a wounded comrade to safety. And then, he did it again and again. Three times, he raced through heavy machine gunfire. Three times, he carried his fellow soldiers to safety.

The battle stretched on for days. Eventually, the platoon's leadership broke down. Too many officers had become casualties. So William stepped up and took command. He reorganized the depleted squads. Every time there was a lull in combat, he led rescues of the wounded. As a lieutenant later described it, William was "cool, calm, intelligent, and personally utterly fearless." That young kid who lied about his age grew up fast in war. And he received accolades for his valor, including the Distinguished Service Cross.

When he came home, William went to school for forestry and began a nursery business in the Bronx. It was hard work, lots of physical labor, just like he liked it. He married a red-head, blue-eyed woman named Bertha Schiffer, and they had 3 children who gave them 14 grandchildren. He bought a house upstate, where the grandkids spent their summers swimming and riding horses. He taught them how to salute. *[Laughter]* He taught them the correct way to raise the flag every morning and lower and fold it every night. He taught them how to be Americans.

William stayed in touch with his fellow veterans too. And when World War II came, William went and talked to the Army about signing up again. *[Laughter]* By then, his war injuries had given him a terrible limp. But he treated that limp just like he treated his age all those years ago. Pay no attention to that, he said. He knew how to build roads, he knew camouflage; maybe there was a place for him in this war too. To Bertha's great relief, the Army said that the best thing William could do for his country was to keep running his business and take care of his family. *[Laughter]*

His daughter Elsie—who's here today with what seems like a platoon of Shermans—Shemins—*[laughter]*—was a—has a theory about what drove her father to serve. He was the son of Russian immigrants, and he was devoted to his Jewish faith. "His family lived through the pogroms," she says. "They saw towns destroyed and children killed. And then, they came to America. And here they found a haven, a home, success. And my father and his sister both went to college. All that in one generation. That's what America meant to him. And that's why he'd do anything for this country."

Well, Elsie, as much as America meant to your father, he means even more to America. It takes our Nation too long sometimes to say so, because Sergeant Shemin served at a time when the contributions and heroism of Jewish Americans in uniform were too often overlooked. But William Shemin saved American lives. He represented our Nation with honor. And so it is my privilege, on behalf of the American people, to make this right and finally award the Medal of Honor to Sergeant William Shemin. I want to invite his daughters Elsie and Ina—86 and 83, and gorgeous—*[laughter]*—to accept this medal on their father's behalf.

*[Lt. Cmdr. Malzone read the citation, and the President presented the medal, assisted by Maj. Spurlock.]*

*The President.* Well, it has taken a long time for Henry Johnson and William Shemin to receive the recognition they deserve. And there are surely others whose heroism is still unacknowledged and uncelebrated. So we have work to do, as a nation, to make sure that all of our heroes' stories are told. And we'll keep at it, no matter how long it takes. America is the country we are today because of people like Henry and William, Americans who signed up to serve and rose to meet their responsibilities and then went beyond. The least we can do is to say: We know who you are. We know what you did for us. We are forever grateful.

May God bless the fallen of all of our wars. May He watch over our veterans and their families and all those who serve today. May God bless the United States of America.

With that, I'd ask Chaplain to return to the podium for a benediction.

[*Maj. Gen. Paul K. Hurley, USA, Army Chief of Chaplains said a prayer.*]

*The President.* Amen. With that, we conclude the formal ceremony. But I welcome everybody to join in a wonderful reception. And let's give our Medal of Honor winners one big round of applause.

Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:27 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Ina Bass and Elsie Shemin-Roth, daughters of Sgt. Shemin.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Medal of Honor :: Pvt. Henry Johnson, posthumous presentation; Addresses and Remarks : Medal of Honor :: Sgt. William Shemin, posthumous presentation.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Bass, Ina; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Clinton, William J.; Hurley, Paul K.; Johnson, Henry; Shemin, William; Shemin-Roth, Elsie; Wilson, Louis.

*Subjects:* Armed Forces, U.S : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Decorations, medals, and awards : Medal of Honor; White House Office : Vice President.

*DCPD Number:* DCPD201500411.