



CITIZENS COINAGE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

801 9TH STREET, NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20220

February 1, 2023

The Honorable Janet Yellen
Secretary of the Treasury
Department of the Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20220

Dear Madam Secretary:

The Citizens Coinage Advisory Committee (CCAC) held a public meeting on January 24, 2023, during which the CCAC reviewed candidate designs and made recommendations for the obverse and reverse of the Harlem Hellfighters Congressional Gold Medal. With this letter, I present the CCAC's recommendations.

Public Law 117-38, the Harlem Hellfighters Congressional Gold Medal Act, awards a Congressional Gold Medal to the 369th Infantry Regiment, commonly known as the Harlem Hellfighters, in recognition of their bravery and outstanding service during World War I.

The 369th Infantry Regiment unit was originally organized in 1916 as the 15th New York National Guard. They were re-designated the 369th Infantry Regiment and assigned to support the French, in spite of an official U.S. policy to keep all American troops under American control. At their commander's insistence they were allowed to fight as a combat unit instead of manual labor tasks initially assigned to them. The unit gave themselves the nickname "The Rattlers" and adopted the image of a rattlesnake as their symbol.

The Harlem Hellfighters stayed on the front during various crucial military campaigns in support of the French 161st Infantry Division. When the war ended, the Harlem Hellfighters had served more days in the combat zone than any other American regiment. They never lost a foot of ground, never had a member captured by the enemy, and they were the first Allied troops to reach the Rhine River as part of the French Army of Occupation. The 369th Infantry Regiment was awarded a French Croix de Guerre unit citation and 171 members of the Harlem Hellfighters were awarded the Croix de Guerre for bravery.

The Harlem Hellfighters were known not only for their bravery, but also for their morale-boosting marching band. Under the direction of James Reese Europe, the band introduced jazz music to European audiences.

During a robust discussion, involving Drs. Harris and Salter, two recognized experts and historians and the liaisons for this program, the CCAC reviewed the historical and cultural significance of the heroism of Harlem Hellfighters. Dr. Salter, a military historian, commented that throughout American history, the heroism of African American soldiers has been documented in many wars prior to World War I and since. These experts also assisted the CCAC in understanding the importance of the design elements in this rich portfolio of fourteen obverse candidate designs and the twelve reverse candidate designs presented by the United States Mint.

In my experience on the CCAC, few discussions of previous programs reviewed by the CCAC, have resulted in more comments or observations about the historical significance along with the artistry of the designs. This is a tribute to the liaisons and the leadership of the United States Mint.

The CCAC voted to recommend obverse **HH-O-04** and with a few modifications reverse **HH-R-03**. Obverse **HH-O-04** was preferred by the liaisons and depicts three uniformed WWI American infantrymen from the 369th Regiment. The inscriptions are “HARLEM HELLFIGHTERS,” “RATTLERS,” “15TH NEW YORK NATIONAL GUARD,” and “U.S. ARMY 369TH INFANTRY REGIMENT.”

Reverse **HH-R-03** represents a commemorative crest assembled from elements significant to the 369th Infantry Regiment: a coiled rattlesnake insignia, the French and American flags, the Croix de Guerre, a French Berthier rifle, and a tenor saxophone. The inscriptions are “U.S. ARMY 369TH INFANTRY REGIMENT,” “LET’S GO,” “RATTLERS,” “2021,” and “ACT OF CONGRESS.” The modifications recommended by the CCAC include removing the following inscriptions: 369TH INFANTRY REGIMENT,” “LET’S GO,” and “RATTLERS,” while adding the ribbon at the top of the Croix de Guerre medal and revising the design of the rifle, if necessary. The CCAC also recommended that the American flag be positioned on the left and reflect the American flag as it existed at the time of World War I. These CCAC recommendations were made with the participation of the liaisons.

As documented historically, the Harlem Hellfighters faced unconscionable discrimination before, during, and after the war. For this, their story is disturbing and often infuriating; however, it is also about the extraordinary bravery, dedication, and sacrifice—about the amazing courage and dignity—the Harlem Hellfighters exhibited in the face of battle and racial prejudice.

As commented by one CCAC member, this Congressional Gold Medal represents another opportunity to reverse the lack of recognition of their heroism and their inescapable role in World War I, and to do so on the “cusp of Black History month”, as noted by another CCAC member. As a third CCAC member noted, an “important role of Congressional Gold Medals is representation” and with this program, “the Harlem Hellfighters will take their rightful place in the pantheon of officially recognized American military heroes.”

As an African American Vietnam War veteran, proud of having received a Bronze Star during my service, this experience was even more unforgettable for me. I will forever be thankful for having filled this gap in my knowledge about heroes who served this country more than a century ago.

I share with other members of the CCAC our pride in reviewing these designs as part of our role and participation in telling the history of this country through the artistry of coins and medals of the United States.

Sincerely,



Lawrence S. Brown, Jr., MD, MPH, FACP, DFASAM
CCAC Chairperson