

'Pilots of the Caribbean': Volunteers of African Heritage in the RAF

Peter Devitt, Royal Air Force Museum



The Royal Air Force Museum is committed to highlighting the diverse nature of the RAF over time. We do this because the Museum has a duty to tell the story of the air force's Commonwealth and Allied personnel, giving credit where it is due. We are also conscious as an institution of the need to create exhibitions and displays that are accessible, stimulating and relevant to Britain's increasingly diverse society.

On Friday 1 November 2013, "'Pilots of the Caribbean": Volunteers of African Heritage in the Royal Air Force' opened at the RAF Museum London. The exhibition, produced in partnership with Black Cultural Archives, tells the little-known story of the RAF's African-Caribbean personnel, commemorating, and celebrating, their contribution to the defence of Britain and the defence of freedom. 'Pilots' also highlights the RAF's success in embracing integration, and shows how Britain's richly cosmopolitan character owes much to the Black men and women who wore air force blue.



Described as 'highly successful and hugely influential', the physical exhibition has been seen by large numbers of people of all ages and backgrounds, and the online version has also proved popular. In March 2014, 'Pilots' was visited by nine of London's mayors, and in July that year, it was taken to Glasgow by the RAF to be displayed during the Commonwealth Games.



(Courtesy of MoD)

While there, it attracted 27,000 visitors, and First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, came to see it. By all reports, he responded warmly to the section describing the role played by RAF veterans in the African and Caribbean independence movements.



In April 2015, the exhibition was highly commended at the Museums and Heritage Awards, the 'Oscars' of the sector, finishing runner-up in its category to the Tower of London poppies installation. 'Pilots' has also been on tour, appearing at other venues in the UK; and in 2017, it travelled to the Caribbean at the invitation of the Jamaican branch of the Royal Air Forces Association and the Jamaica Defence Force Museum. In recent months, we have received requests for it to be displayed in Nottingham and in Barbados.

We are proud to say that the exhibition has helped both the RAF and the Museum to engage successfully with Britain's Black communities, and it continues to inform the work we do. Several of the stories that first appeared in 'Pilots' were included in the Museum's exhibitions marking the

RAF's centenary in 2018. And in November 2021, we mounted 'Freedom Fighters: Diverse Identities in the RAF', a workshop dedicated to the African, Caribbean, South Asian and Irish volunteers that joined the flying services despite being opposed to British rule in their homelands. Supported by the Institute of Historical Research, this groundbreaking fusion of poetry, academic research and public history was as enjoyable as it was thought-provoking.

Through working with Black Cultural Archives, the Museum has been able to build strong networks of like-minded people in communities around the country, and overseas, that it has been able to turn to for advice, assistance and support. Among our long-standing friends are author Stephen Bourne, who pioneered the study of African and Caribbean military history in the UK; Audrey Dewjee, an outstanding researcher, always willing to share her discoveries; and author Mark Johnson, who generously let us use his research material only weeks before the publication of his own book, 'Caribbean Volunteers at War.'

We continue to make good friends. Amanda Epe, who created the film 'Flying for Britain,' about Sierra Leonean navigator and diplomat, Johnny Smythe, is here today. And I'm pleased to say that Amanda is joined by Flight Lieutenant Smythe's son, Eddy, the film's narrator. Jamie Franks is a serving airman, based at RAF Waddington, who runs a dynamic, and very welcoming, WhatsApp group dedicated to Black military history. Every day, Jamie's group attracts posts from ex-service personnel and their families; from authors and researchers; and from members of the public keen to know more about the Black volunteers. Veterans Johanna Lewin, in Jamaica, and Donald Campbell, with us today, are regular contributors, along with author, Maureen Dickson. They have recently been joined by RAF Museum Researcher Russell Smith. Russell is a Londoner of Caribbean heritage, and he has just embarked on a fully-funded PhD, researching the RAF'S Black personnel at the University of Glasgow.

Russell's doctorate is part of a new programme of academic research into Black history and culture being offered by the University; and this is in direct response to the questions raised by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis two-and-a-half years ago.

For nine years, then, public and media interest in the RAF's Black volunteers has remained exceptionally strong. But I should admit, right now, that no one at the Museum expected that 'Pilots' would succeed in the way it has; and it is, perhaps, instructive to remember how it all began.



(Courtesy of IWM)

On a bleak Tuesday afternoon in February 2011, a group of 11 Black teenagers visited the RAF Museum London, and we were asked to talk to them about the RAF and diversity. The youngsters were lively and intelligent, and the session appeared to be going well, until we showed them an image of Flying Officer Arthur Weekes of Barbados and Flight Sergeant Collins Joseph from Trinidad, two Black Spitfire pilots serving with 132 Squadron in 1943.

At first, it went absolutely, deathly, silent. And then the atmosphere became electric as we were bombarded with questions: 'Could Black men be pilots?' 'Are they American?' 'Did Black people become officers?' 'Were they allowed to fly Spitfires?' We did our best to answer them, but we were completely taken aback. Suddenly, all of the things we piously say in museums about 'access', 'relevance' and 'ownership' were real and tangible before our eyes. One young man said, 'I thought we only dug trenches and peeled potatoes', while another looked me straight in the eye and asked quietly, 'Why haven't we heard this before?'

It was a very good question, and the impact of the photograph was so strong, and so unexpected, that we promised, then and there, that we would do something to bring the story of the Black volunteers to a wider audience. Two days later, we were told that these polite, friendly and enthusiastic young people were former gang members.

It was decided that the RAF Museum would mount an exhibition about African-Caribbean personnel, and we invited Black Cultural Archives to join us as partners. BCA assigned their historian, Steve Martin, to the project. Steve was good to work with, and we think that the partnership of two such very different institutions allowed us to tell a uniquely powerful story in a new way.

The RAF Museum holds a wealth of archival material, but we knew we didn't have enough to do the Black contribution justice. We therefore launched a public appeal, inviting veterans, their families and serving personnel to contribute letters, photographs and other artefacts. People responded

warmly to a national museum having the humility, and the strength, to ask for help and the response was immediate and overwhelming.



(Courtesy of AHB)

Flight Lieutenant Cy Grant's family lent us his wartime flying log book and uniform tunic. And his daughter, Sami Moxon, kindly donated the tunic to the Museum last year. We also received a 'Sword of Honour' from RAF Cranwell identical to that presented to Pilot Officer — later Air Commodore — David Case; the most outstanding cadet officer of 1977.



(Courtesy of AVM Peter Dye OBE)

Perhaps most poignantly, Corporal Sony Campbell donated the pocket Bible she took with her to Afghanistan. As much as possible, we encouraged people to tell their stories in their own words, and Corporal Campbell provided the caption for the Bible:

'This was what I carried with me on many of my deployments for a bit of mental security and at times of loneliness...Hard going it was!'



(RAFM: X007-5211/001)

Born into a large family in Derby, Sony Campbell finished university before joining the RAF in July 1999. Now a Sergeant, Sony is an Aerospace Systems Operator, or "Scopie", and says, 'while you sleep, I watch the skies.' She has served all around the world, and recently returned from a gruelling tour in the Falkland Islands. She also enjoys sport and has represented the RAF in volleyball and athletics. Sony says her only regret is that she didn't join up earlier, and adds:

'The RAF has given me a lifestyle I never thought I could have and I'm making the most of it.'



Since the appeal in August 2013, we have received several collections of papers relating to the African-Caribbean volunteers. And it should be stressed that very nearly every Black person who has served in the RAF has volunteered – they chose to come; they weren't compelled. A personal favourite is the memoir written by Flight Lieutenant Ivo De Souza, a wartime Mosquito pilot from Jamaica. This document was proudly presented to the Museum by his daughter, Irène, beneath the starboard wing of our preserved de Havilland Mosquito, with four generations of the De Souza family present.

'Pilots of the Caribbean' comprises 18 panels of text and images as well as the stand-alone biographies of 11 selected individuals. Among the biographies, are those of Pathfinder navigator Squadron Leader Ulric Cross, and Flight Lieutenant Trevor Edwards, a former fast jet pilot.



(Courtesy of IWM)

Ulric Cross worked on Trinidad's railways, but his real love was aviation. With the outbreak of war in 1939, he saw the situation demanded action:

'The world was drowning in fascism...so I decided to do something about it and volunteered to fight in the RAF.'

Cross trained as a navigator and was commissioned as an officer before being posted to 139 (Jamaica) Squadron. The unit was so named because it was equipped with bombers paid for by donations from the Jamaican people. This patriotic initiative originated in Jamaica just after Dunkirk, in May 1940, and was soon adopted throughout the Empire and Commonwealth.

Cross was selected for the élite Pathfinder Force, whose squadrons had the difficult, and dangerous, job of marking targets for night raids by Bomber Command. In June 1944, he received the Distinguished Flying Cross and, in November, the Distinguished Service Order, for his devotion to duty and navigational skill. The Trinidadian navigator eventually completed 80 missions over enemy territory having twice refused to be rested.

Ulric Cross left the RAF in 1947. He subsequently became a High Court Judge in his native Trinidad, and in 1990, he was appointed High Commissioner for Trinidad and Tobago in London. He died on 4 October 2013, while we were working on the exhibition, and I remember receiving an email that simply said, 'Ulric's gone.'

Flight Lieutenant Trevor Edwards was supportive of the exhibition from the beginning, and he kindly provided the following text:

'I was born in Woolwich, east London, to West Indian parents. I grew up in a pretty tough housing estate, but I worked hard at school and in 1985 became an officer in the RAF Regiment. I subsequently transferred to aircrew; starting my flying training in 1987 and receiving my 'wings' at RAF Valley the following year. After coming top of the Tactical Weapons course, I became a fighter pilot flying Jaguars with 54 Squadron at RAF Coltishall.'



(Courtesy of MoD)

The first time I flew a fully armed Jaguar, I could not believe that a lad from east London was authorised to bomb and strafe a deserted island in a multi-million-pound single-seat fighter aircraft. My tour on Jaguars was eventful as the Squadron was deployed to Turkey flying missions over the 'no-fly zone' in North Iraq. We also operated from Southern Italy, supporting NATO forces during the Bosnian conflict. After my time on 54 Squadron, I became a flying instructor on Tucano aircraft at RAF Linton-on-Ouse. I left the RAF as a Flight Lieutenant in 1997 to join British Airways and I am currently an Airbus Captain.

I consider myself to have been a very ordinary London kid who was trained by the RAF to do very extraordinary things.'

A BBC film from 1990, shown with the exhibition, includes thought-provoking interviews with a number of Black veterans, and at one point, a young Trevor Edwards utters the memorable line:

'When I wear jeans and a t-shirt, I get stopped by the Police. I mean, I don't look like a fighter pilot, do I?'

'Pilots of the Caribbean' attempts to tell an often, horrific story honestly. We begin with a description of slavery, showing how it was that at least 12 million African people were enslaved, transported and exploited to support the plantation system in the Caribbean and the Americas. Millions died during their capture, or in transit, while the survivors laboured in inhuman conditions to create wealth they would never see.

We learned how the experience of slavery forced Black people to be strong and resourceful. And also, how it made them keenly aware of the value of freedom and willing to fight for it when the opportunity arose. Rebellions and armed resistance were frequent, and the West Indian colonies witnessed major uprisings every 20 years.

Despite the economic benefits of slavery in the colonies, Britain outlawed the slave trade in 1807 and abolished slavery itself in 1833. Thereafter, she led the fight to suppress the traffic in human lives.

The African-Caribbean experience of the First World War is outlined in the exhibition. We explain how the 'colour bar' to Black enlistment in the British armed forces was relaxed under the pressure of war, and highlight the story of Sergeant William Robinson Clarke from Kingston, Jamaica, who became Britain's first Black combat pilot on 26 April 1917.

Born on 4 October 1895, 'Robbie' Clarke found employment as a chauffeur after leaving school. However, in 1915, he decided to pay his own passage to Britain to play a part in the war. The obvious question is 'why?' Why would an intelligent young man, with a respectable job, come half-way round the world to risk his life for the country that had enslaved his ancestors?



(Courtesy of the Royal Aero Club Trust)

Like young men all over the Empire, some of the volunteers enlisted for economic or personal reasons or to seek adventure. There were those, however, that had a different understanding of what was at stake. Black people were well aware of the past, but seeing beyond the horrors of slavery and the injustices of colonial rule, many also considered that Britain was the 'mother country' and strongly identified with her culture, institutions and professed ideals.

For them, the war was being fought to defend civilization and they would do what they could to help. Moreover, they would show Britain that, as loyal subjects of His Majesty, they deserved better treatment, and perhaps even independence from colonial rule. This sentiment was expressed by Jamaican Sydney Moxsy in his poem 'The Motherland Calls':

'Strike Brothers Strike! A blow for England's sake,

Brave hearts that blow shall even stronger, make,

When England calls, what British heart would shirk?

She only calls in need for Empire's work.

Colonial hearts in loyalty must stir.

Face danger, death, face all for sake of her.

They rush to aid her, and for England stand.

No distance chills the love for Motherland.'



(Every effort has been made to contact the owner of this image)

On 29 May 1917, Sergeant Clarke joined No. 4 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, at Abeele in Belgium, and began flying R.E.8 biplanes over the Western Front.

While on a reconnaissance mission on the morning of 28 July, he and his observer, Second Lieutenant F.P. Blencowe, were attacked by enemy fighters. He described the action in a letter to his mother:

'I was doing some photographs a few miles the other side when about five Hun scouts came down upon me, and before I could get away, I got a bullet through the spine. I managed to pilot the

machine nearly back to the aerodrome, but had to put her down as I was too weak to fly any more...My observer escaped without any injury.'

Happily, 'Robbie' recovered from his wounds, but you can see the pain etched into his face in the photograph taken in 1919.



(Courtesy of Royal Aero Club Trust)

After the war, he returned to Jamaica to work in the building trade. He was an active veteran and became Life President of the Royal Air Forces Association, Jamaica.

William Robinson Clarke died in April 1981, and was buried at the Military Cemetery at Up Park Camp, in the heart of Kingston. Like so many who have been at the 'sharp end' of conflict, he

preferred not to talk about his experiences, with the result that he remains largely unknown in Jamaica today.

During the First World War, racial prejudice and discrimination were rife in the British Army and there were instances where official neglect led to the deaths of Black soldiers. In December 1918, men of the British West Indies Regiment at Taranto, in Southern Italy, mutinied in protest at unfair pay and working conditions. Though the mutiny was crushed, its leaders, calling themselves the Caribbean League, swore to:

'Fight for the rights of the Black man and independence for the Caribbean.'

On returning home, radicalised veterans joined Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and engaged in political agitation. Garveyite ideas also informed the labour unrest that gripped the West Indies from 1934 to 1939. In these years, long-standing social and economic inequalities were exacerbated by the impact of the Great Depression and living standards in the West Indies fell dramatically. These problems culminated in the Jamaican labour riots of 1938, in which 46 people were killed.

Pan-Africanism (the ideology promoting unity between peoples of African heritage worldwide) also gained ground in the Caribbean and African colonies and underpinned the opposition to the invasion of Ethiopia by fascist Italy in 1935. Ethiopia became a symbol of African resistance to European domination, and hundreds of Black men petitioned Parliament for the right to fight for her cause. From the mid-1930s, however, a more sinister threat was posed by the racist ideology, aggressive militarism and expansionist ambitions of Nazi Germany.

African-Caribbean people were well aware of the shortcomings of British colonial rule. Nevertheless, when war came on 3 September 1939, young Black men were again prepared to risk their lives in her defence.



(Courtesy of IWM)

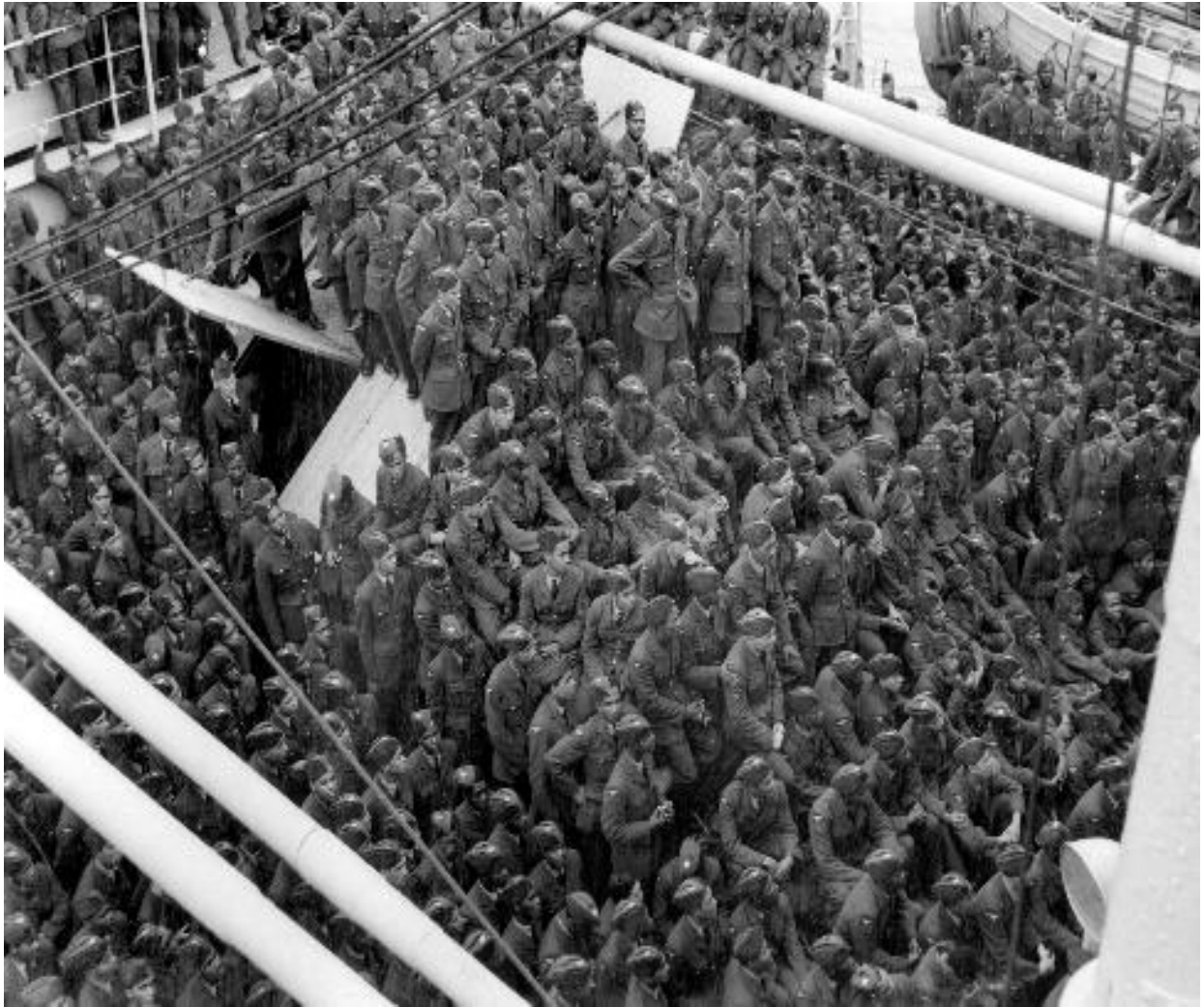
Here we see Jellicoe Scoon as an aircrew cadet in Parliament Square on 26 March 1942. Commissioned as an officer, the Trinidadian fighter pilot went on to fly Spitfires with 41 Squadron and Hawker Typhoons with 198 Squadron.

The 'colour bar' was finally lifted in October 1939, and the bulk of the exhibition concerns the 6,000 Black personnel from the Caribbean and Africa that decided to join the RAF during the war. Around 5,500 of these volunteers served as ground staff, and some 450 flew with Bomber, Fighter, Coastal and Training Commands. Another 80 women served in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. In 1939, the population of the West Indies stood at less than three million souls.



(Courtesy of IWM)

Leading Aircraftwoman Sonia Thompson was a student in Edinburgh in 1940 before going home to Jamaica, and then returning to join the WAAF in 1943. She was accompanied by her sister, Noelle, and both women excelled as runners at air force athletics events around the country. After the war, Sonia Thompson served as a nurse at New End Hospital in Hampstead, North London.



A thousand Caribbean airmen arriving in Britain by troopship, 1944 (Courtesy of IWM)

In Africa, the colonial governments obstructed enlistment and only 60 Black volunteers were accepted. A further 5,200 Africans were, however, encouraged to join the West African Air Corps, a local auxiliary force based in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia.

A number of Black British people are also known to have served, and we include the story of Corporal Lilian Bader, from Liverpool, who lived a hard, but inspiring life. With the outbreak of war, she worked briefly in a NAAFI canteen, but was told to leave because she was Black.



(Courtesy of IWM)

In March 1941, Lilian joined the WAAF and trained as an Instrument Repairer. During her training, she received the news that her brother, Jim, who was serving in the Merchant Navy, had been killed at sea. She nevertheless passed her course 'First Class', becoming one of the first women in the air force to qualify in that trade. Posted to RAF Shawbury, Lilian worked long hours checking for faults in the instruments of the aircraft based there. She was good at her job and was promoted to Corporal.

After the war, Lilian studied for a degree at London University and became a teacher. Her younger son flew helicopters for the Royal Navy and later qualified as an airline pilot. Lilian reflected on her family's military service:

"Father served in the First World War; his three children served in the Second World War. I married a coloured man who was in the Second World War...as was his brother who was decorated for bravery in Burma. Their father also served in the First World War. Our Son was a helicopter pilot, he served in Northern Ireland. So, all in all, I think we've given back more to this country than we've received."

We also feature Sergeant Arthur Young from Cardiff. During the war, Sergeant Young's father and elder brother also lost their lives serving with the Merchant Navy, and the young Welshman was himself killed along with his six crewmates – Peter Lines, Raymond Barnes, Harry Reid from Canada, John Steel, John Davenport and Mohand Singh from India – when their Lancaster bomber crashed in Salford on the night of 30 July 1944.



(Courtesy of Patti Flynn)

Four of the seven could not be identified, and they are commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial for those with no known grave. Arthur was a talented jazz trumpeter and had hoped to turn professional after the war, while Mohand Singh planned to return to medical school and practice as a doctor.

Arthur's younger brother idolised him and never got over his death. In 2006, he visited the National Memorial Arboretum, and on returning home, killed himself. His sister, Patti Flynn, the only survivor of a family destroyed by war, became an accomplished jazz singer, performing in Cardiff until her death, from cancer, on 10 September 2020.

Again, the exhibition examines the Black recruits' motives for volunteering. Like young people throughout the Empire and Commonwealth, some joined to see the world or to find adventure.



(Courtesy Mark Johnson)

Others, such as John Blair, one of over 3,700 Jamaicans to serve, came to fight against tyranny:

'We never thought about defending the Empire or anything along those lines. We just knew deep down inside that we were all in this together and that what was taking place around our world had to be stopped...Few people think about what would have happened to them in Jamaica if Germany had defeated Britain, but we certainly could have returned to slavery.'

John Blair volunteered for the RAF in October 1942, and was selected to train as a navigator before being commissioned as an officer. He survived a full tour of 30 bombing operations with 102 Squadron between December 1944 and May 1945, and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Flight Lieutenant Blair was well-respected by his colleagues and he was asked to remain in the RAF after the war, serving until 1963. He returned to Jamaica to become a teacher, and died in 2004.

John Blair was the great-uncle of historian, Mark Johnson, author of the excellent book 'Caribbean Volunteers at War.' Mark was, and remains, hugely supportive of the exhibition, and he provided the text for his uncle's stand-alone biography, writing:

'Uncle John was also a 'pathfinder' for his people, who overcame racism just as he had struggled through flak and enemy fighters. In this, he was greatly aided by the RAF, which embraced the Black volunteers and ensured they took their rightful place in the fight for civilisation.'

Peter Thomas, from Nigeria, volunteered because he admired Britain and the British, giving as his reason:

'My great-grandfather was a chieftain. One day his rival betrayed him to a slave dealer. He was put on a ship along with 100 other slaves and was soon on his way to America. Ten days out in the

Atlantic, his ship was intercepted by one of Her Majesty's ships. The slaves were rescued, and at Freetown, Sierra Leone, my great-grandfather regained his freedom.'



African With Wings
FIRST African to get his wings in the Royal Air Force was Flight Lieutenant Peter Thomas, whose father is president of the Chamber of Commerce at Lagos. He is now the first Nigerian pilot to be killed in action.
Thomas visualised a splendid future for West Africa: a place among the nations, secondary industries established, full social services. He had a great love for Britain, the reason for which he explained in these words to Captain Derek Tangye, author of *One King*:
"My great-grandfather was a chieftain. One day his rival betrayed him to a slave dealer. He was put on a ship along with 100 other slaves and was soon on his way to America. Ten days out in the Atlantic his ship was intercepted by one of her Majesty's ships. The slaves were rescued, and at Freetown my great-grandfather regained his freedom."

(RAFM: DC76/74/1050)

Flight Lieutenant Thomas joined the RAF because he had read about the heroes of the Battle of Britain and wanted the same. In September 1942, he became the first Black African to qualify as a pilot and the first to be commissioned as an officer. He was killed in a flying accident in poor weather on 26 January 1945, and is buried in Bath Cemetery.

The Black volunteers had learned a lot about Britain at school and most considered that they were in a very real sense 'coming home' to the mother country. On arriving here, however, many experienced culture shock. The people of Britain were not like white people in the colonies and, for the first time, they encountered men, women and children of different social classes and backgrounds. The volunteers also met people from other islands in the West Indies for the first time; and there was rivalry, and sometimes antagonism, between the men of the different contingents.



"Beyond a boundary": RAF Colerne Cricket XI, 1946 (RAFM: PC94/159/33)

All of the volunteers from the Black colonies had to get used to the British climate and the rationed British food. While it could do nothing about the weather, the RAF sometimes managed to obtain Caribbean foodstuffs for the newcomers. Social and sports facilities were also made available, and

in the cricket season the inclusion of West Indian players helped break down barriers and made RAF teams difficult to beat.

Few British people had met a Black person before and most were ignorant about the volunteers and their homelands. This ignorance, combined with the prejudice and insensitivity of individuals, sometimes caused misunderstandings and conflict between the volunteers and their new hosts. Nevertheless, according to veterans, the natives were 'generally friendly' and they were grateful that Black people were fighting by their side. We employ quotations from books, memoirs and recorded interviews to illustrate a broad range of opinions. Here are a few:

'A darling old couple...humbly begged to be allowed to shake my hand for luck. Until then I thought that sort of superstition was confined to uneducated colonials.'

'We were treated very well by the RAF and by the local civilians...people were kind and went out of their way to be helpful because we were all fighting for the same cause.'

'I admired their strong sense of justice and the guts with which they were prepared to fight for it. The average Britisher proved to be a very fine and decent person once he got to know the African.'

'Pilots' also shows how, by the end of the war, the welcome extended to the volunteers had begun to wear thin.

'After I was demobbed in Nottingham a Padre said to me: "When are you going home?" I was shocked; if a Padre could say that, what must everyone else be thinking.'

'It was as if it was okay to be over here while there was an emergency, but in 1945 we weren't wanted anymore.'

Despite this, the evidence shows that the RAF took the issue of racism seriously and we quote an Air Ministry Confidential Order of 1944:

'All ranks should clearly understand that there is no colour bar in the Royal Air Force...any instant of discrimination on grounds of colour by white officers or airmen or any attitude of hostility towards personnel of non-European descent should be immediately and severely checked.'

It is worth noting that having abandoned the 'colour bar' in 1939, the RAF was now more advanced with regard to race than the other Services and civilian employers of the day. What is more, the rules introduced in the air force in the 1940s would not be seen in the civil workplace until the 1960s. This surprisingly progressive side to the RAF is brought out in quotes from Black veterans who state that the Junior Service treated them with respect. For example, Flight Lieutenant Billy Strachan, a Jamaican bomber pilot, wrote:

'If one might have expected me to have suffered, if not discrimination, at least a constant barrage of racist jokes; I can confirm that this did not happen.'



Flight Lieutenant Billy Strachan, standing at extreme left (Courtesy of IWM)

Of the 450 Black aircrew that flew with the RAF and Royal Canadian Air Force, 150 were killed in combat or in accidents: a loss rate of one in three. We can only speculate what effect the deaths of so many good men had on the small populations of the Caribbean islands.



(Courtesy of Audrey Dewjee)

Here we see Sergeant J.C. Dickinson RCAF and Sergeant Leslie Gilkes from Trinidad – both air gunners with No. 9 Squadron. Sergeant Dickinson survived the war, but Sergeant Gilkes was shot down and killed with his six crewmates on 3 August 1943, three days after the photograph was taken.

The RAF fully integrated the volunteers into its units without entering their ethnic origin on their records. This means that their contribution cannot easily be separated from those of their British, Commonwealth and Allied comrades. However, it is known that one hundred of the volunteers became officers, and 103 were decorated for gallantry or exceptional service.

From 1942, matters were complicated by the appearance in Britain of American troops. The United States forces were racially segregated, and the Americans expected their British allies to accept the fact. A poll taken in 1943, however, showed an overwhelming majority of ordinary British people opposed racial segregation. Leading Aircraftman Allan Wilmot from Kingston, Jamaica, served with the Royal Navy before joining the RAF's Air Sea Rescue service in 1943. He remembered:

'The African-American soldiers often felt helpless and resigned to being bullied by their white American colleagues. The American military authorities would arrest the African-Americans if they fought back. Also, many white British men and women fought on our side because they resented the white Americans displaying their racism in Britain...After the white Americans saw that there was a difference in the way West Indians reacted to them, and that we fought back vigorously, they were more cautious and left us alone.'

After the war, Allan Wilmot enjoyed a career as a singer with the Southlanders, a Caribbean quartet best known for their novelty song, 'The Mole in a Hole', released in 1958. Mr Wilmot died on 20 October 2021, at the age of 96.

Nine per cent of the American military was Black and there is a focus on the inspiring story of the African American pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group, the famous 'Red Tails', who overcame segregation in the United States Army Air Force to win renown in combat. This is understandable, but sadly, it has had the effect of overshadowing the smooth and successful integration of the Caribbean and African aircrew into RAF and Canadian squadrons.



(Courtesy of IWM)

Flying Officer Akin Shenbanjo served as a wireless operator with 76 Squadron, and in December 1944, the Nigerian was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Shenbanjo is pictured with his crewmates, who named their Halifax bomber 'Achtung! The Black Prince' in his honour.



(Courtesy of WR Chorley)

Incidentally, these men came together through a process known as 'crewing up.' This entailed all the newly-trained flyers being left alone in a hangar to form crews; and more than one veteran likened it to asking six other men to dance. In other words, Akin Shenbanjo chose six white comrades, each with a particular skill set, and each one of them chose him.

While the aircrew tended to mix with white people less likely to hold or express racist views, this was not always the case for those who served on the ground. And although the rules regarding racial discrimination and harassment were clearly worded, a minority of white ground staff continued to discriminate when they could get away with it. The Air Ministry was aware of this, writing:

'It is to be regretted that among ground personnel a spirit of tolerance and broadmindedness is at times lacking.'

As a result, a number of Black volunteers suffered verbal, and sometimes physical, abuse, while others were unfairly passed over for promotion. Some of the volunteers responded by taking the law into their own hands, and fights were not uncommon. It should also be said that a minority of the Caribbean airmen were considered 'not amenable to discipline', and were among a contingent returned to Jamaica in May 1946. However, despite the misbehaviour of a few, Black and white personnel got on well for the most part.

After the war, the Black airmen and airwomen returned to Africa and the Caribbean. They were proud of having played their part in the defeat of Nazism and they carried with them the dynamic ethos of the RAF; with its emphasis on efficiency, teamwork and achievement. Many of the veterans now became lawyers and teachers, or entered politics, as they sought to improve themselves and change their homelands for the better.

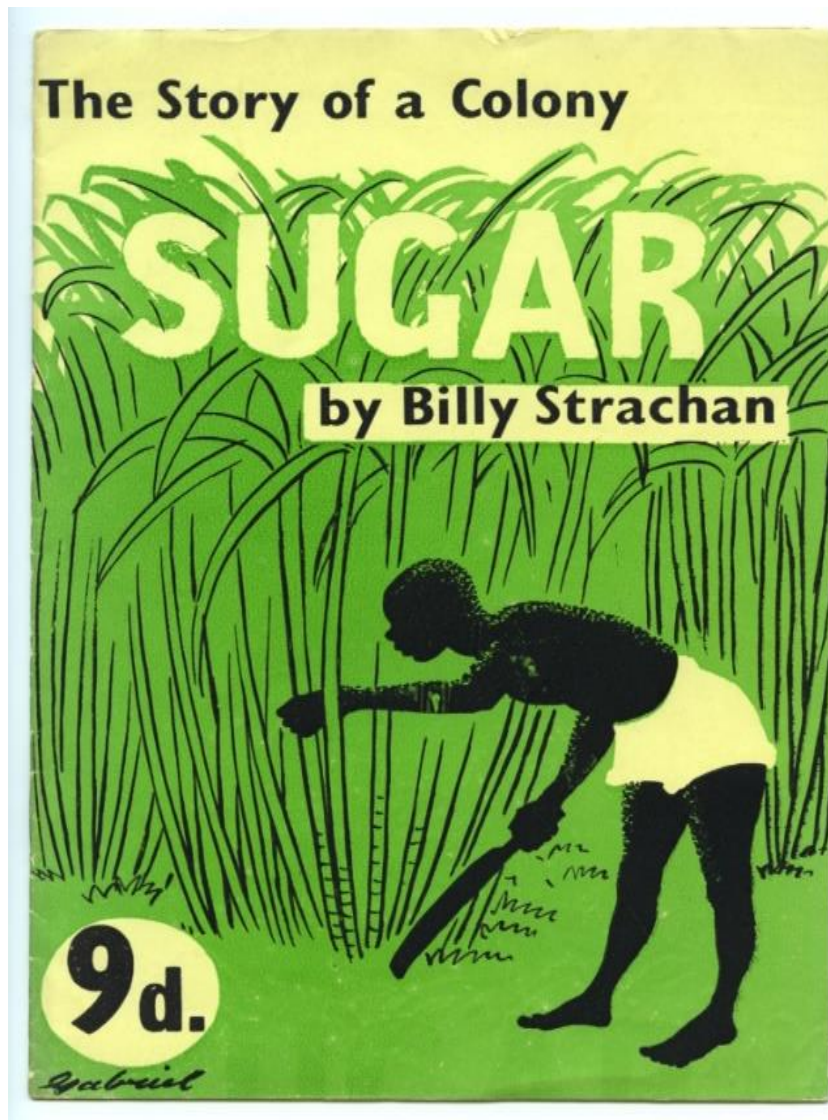
A number of the RAF veterans — including Flight Lieutenants Billy Strachan and Dudley Thompson from Jamaica, and Flying Officer Errol Barrow from Barbados — joined political parties demanding an end to British colonial rule.



Newly-liberated prisoner of war, Flight Lieutenant Cy Grant from British Guiana (Guyana), shared the same goal:

'I decided then, that I would study law, because I wanted to go back to the Caribbean. My ambition was to help get the British out of the West Indies.'

Here we see a pamphlet written in 1955 by Flight Lieutenant Billy Strachan, which criticises British companies producing sugar in the Caribbean.



(Courtesy of Marika Sherwood)

Dudley Thompson was a Jamaican Pathfinder navigator who, on leaving the Service, embarked on an outstanding legal and political career in Jamaica and in East and West Africa. A committed pan-Africanist, Flight Lieutenant Thompson in 1952, organised the defence team to defend Jomo Kenyatta during his trial for treason during the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya. In later years, President Kenyatta would say of Thompson, 'This man saved my life.'



(Courtesy of Audrey Dewjee)

The efforts of these veterans, and others like them, were rewarded when Britain granted her African and Caribbean colonies independence within the Commonwealth in the 1950s and 1960s.

Flying Officer Errol Barrow and Flight Lieutenant Michael Manley became the Prime Ministers of Barbados and Jamaica respectively. While committed to ending British rule in the Caribbean, and to building democratic, egalitarian and just societies in their home islands, they remained intensely proud of their service in the air force.



(Courtesy of Barbados High Commission)

Errol Barrow died in office on 1 June 1987, aged only 67. His gravestone reads:

'In memory of Flying Officer Errol Walton Barrow, Navigator, Royal Air Force, World War Two, and Prime Minister of Barbados.'



(Courtesy of Barbados High Commission)

The arrival of HMT Empire Windrush at Tilbury on 21 June 1948, symbolises the beginning of large-scale Caribbean immigration to Britain. It is forgotten, however, that a significant number of the Empire Windrush's passengers were RAF airmen returning from leave or veterans re-joining the Service.



(Courtesy Press Association Archive)

Baron Baker, a former RAF Policeman from Jamaica, greeted the ship. He remembered that:

'Many of those on the Windrush were ex-servicemen, and there was an immediate understanding between us. There was a greater feeling of togetherness among that generation of us than I have seen in any group I have come across.'

Baker organised temporary accommodation for the newcomers in a disused air raid shelter in Clapham Common. The nearest Labour Exchange to Clapham was in Coldharbour Lane in Brixton. A number of the newcomers went there to find work, helping to establish the multi-racial community we know today.

While the Black airmen were fortunate to be returning to a Service that valued their skills and treated them with respect, their civilian counterparts faced a cold and often hostile reception. Discrimination in housing and employment, coupled with routine verbal and physical abuse, was endured by many Black people living in the poorest parts of Britain's cities.

Returning to civilian life in the 1950s, the veterans set to work as 'pathfinders' for the Black community. Corporal Sam King, who also came back to the RAF on the Windrush, helped establish the 'pardner' scheme in South London to help Black families buy their own houses. He became the first Black Mayor of Southwark in 1983, and was later awarded the MBE. In 1996, King established the Windrush Foundation with historian Arthur Torrington, and he successfully campaigned for the date of the ship's arrival in Britain to be marked as a public holiday.

While preparing 'Pilots', I had the pleasure of talking to Mr King about his time as a Flight Mechanic maintaining Spitfires at RAF Hawkinge. He was guest of honour at the opening of the exhibition in November 2013, and in his welcoming speech, he echoed what other veterans had said about the RAF being a good place for Black people. He also summed up the value of his service, saying:

'The RAF taught me two things: the importance of discipline and the importance of honesty.'



(Courtesy of Black Cultural Archives)

Sam King MBE died in Brixton on 17 June 2016, and his funeral at Southwark Cathedral was attended by more than 500 mourners.

In 1958, Baron Baker found West Indians in Notting Hill, West London, being terrorised by racist gangs. Using his RAF Police training, Baker organised an effective 'neighbourhood watch' employing Black veterans.

Over the August Bank Holiday weekend, Mosleyites and Teddy Boys armed with flick-knives, clubs and bottles flocked to Notting Hill in search of Black people to attack. They came up against what

is believed to have been a posse of West Indian ex-servicemen, organised by Baker with military precision from a Headquarters in Blenheim Crescent. According to Police Constable Thomas Ferguson:

'On Monday, 1st September 1958, at 9.45pm, I was...in Blenheim Crescent, W.11, when I saw a large group of coloured men, about 30, walking along Blenheim Crescent towards Ladbroke Grove. They were completely blocking the footway and I heard shouts of "What about it now?" This was directed towards a small group of white people. I saw that these men were armed with sticks, iron bars and razors.'

The white rioters had no answer to this overwhelming show of force and withdrew quickly. And the Black community in Notting Hill was never troubled in the same way again. PC Ferguson did make an arrest that evening: Senior Aircraftman Anthony Hill, aged 20, who was stationed at RAF Uxbridge.

In April 2022 a Blue Plaque was unveiled to Hubert 'Baron' Baker in Blenheim Crescent, Notting Hill, for helping the Windrush migrants in 1948, and for defending the Black Community in West London from racist attacks 10 years later. On a happier note, not long after the 'Race Riots', the Notting Hill Carnival was founded, and Sam King played a part in organising that as well.

British-born Paul Stephenson OBE, who was an airman from 1953 to 1960, states:

'Those seven years I spent in the RAF were to change my life.'

In 1963, Stephenson skilfully organised a peaceful boycott which broke the Bristol Omnibus Company's 'colour bar', and opened the way for Black bus crews. Another volunteer was Jamaican Val McCalla, who left the RAF in the mid-1960s, with book-keeping and administrative skills. He put these to good use in 1982, when establishing The Voice, the aptly named Black newspaper famous for its forthright campaigning style.

There are many other stories, and it is clear that the foundations of Britain's Black community were laid in part by RAF veterans.



(Courtesy of Mehdi Schneyders)

Here, again, is Collins Joseph, seated in the cockpit of his Spitfire; and on 18 October 1943, he shot down a Messerschmitt 109 over France. Pilot Officer Joseph was killed by American 'friendly fire' near Malmedy, in Belgium, on New Year's Eve, 1944. The Trinidadian fighter pilot was 28 years old.

For many members of the African diaspora, the history of the RAF was, until recently, a 'closed off' area of white endeavour and achievement irrelevant to their lives. Thankfully, this is no longer the case, and we have witnessed large numbers of visitors, both Black and white, engaging with an exhibition that embraces heroism, comradeship, glamour and success. 'Pilots' has made a lot of people proud, and happy, and more than one visitor has been moved to tears.

Feminist historian, Stella Dadzie, is the daughter of Ghanaian navigator and diplomat, Emmanuel Dadzie. On a Saturday afternoon in 2013, Stella came to Hendon to see 'Pilots', and over tea, she said something I've never forgotten:

'There was a hunger for this exhibition. For the first time I saw Black people being represented in a museum, not as a problem or as an "issue", but as heroes.'

We are living at a time of intense debate about Britain's history, with the narratives of colonialism and slavery, and the cultural legacy of empire, under scrutiny. The debate has become ever more impassioned, and ever more polarized, and it is clear that things will never be the same again. It is also clear that those of us privileged to work in museums, galleries and archives are in the eye of the storm.

At the Royal Air Force Museum, we believe that we must welcome this challenge, and that we have a duty to promote open and informed debate about the RAF and its place in British, and world, history. We also believe that by taking the stories of people from hitherto underrepresented groups, and combining them with the familiar narratives, we will be able to create a more inclusive, more relevant and more robust history of the Service.

'Pilots of the Caribbean' is a success story that reflects well on the volunteers, on their white comrades and on the RAF itself. Indeed, the Service deserves to be seen as one of Britain's most open and progressive institutions. It is particularly hoped that young Black people will see it, and that it will encourage them to acquire ownership of an important and inspiring part of their heritage.

I am indebted to my colleague, Lucia Wallbank, for the information about Leading Aircraftwoman Sonia Thompson.