African and Caribbean Heroes of the RAF 1918-2023

Character Cards celebrating 75 years of the Windrush generation
Glossary

Words highlighted in blue on the character cards

- **Barrister** – Specialists in court advocacy and independent sources of legal advice to their clients
- **Bookkeeper** - A person whose job is to keep records of the financial affairs of a business
- **Chauffeur** – A person employed to drive a private or hired car
- **Convent** - A Christian community of nuns living together under monastic vows
- **Demobilised** – Taken out of active service, typically at the end of a war
- **Instrument Repairer** – A person who repairs and restores the cockpit dials in aeroplanes
- **Liaison officer** – An employee who is responsible for establishing a positive working relationship between two or more people
- **Middle Temple** – One of the four legal societies in London which together form the Inns of Court
- **Mission** – An important assignment given to a person or group of people, typically involving travel abroad
- **Reconnaissance** - Military observation of a region to locate an enemy or ascertain strategic features
- **To win your ‘wings’** – To obtain the necessary qualifications for flying a plane
- **VE Day** – 8 May 1945, Victory In Europe Day
- **Wireless Operator** - A crew member of an aircraft who operates a radio transmitter to communicate over long distances.
RAF Ranks on the character cards

Commissioned Ranks
- Flying Officer
- Flight Lieutenant
- Squadron Leader

Non-commissioned ranks
- Sergeant

https://www.raf.mod.uk/our-organisation/raf-ranks/
Britain's first Black pilot, Sergeant William Robinson (Robbie) Clarke was born in Kingston, Jamaica. Robbie worked as a chauffeur in Jamaica and travelled to England during the First World War in 1915 to join the Royal Flying Corps, where he started out as an Air Mechanic. He was promoted to Sergeant in 1917 and flew RE8 biplanes over the Western Front on reconnaissance missions. He was attacked and injured by enemy fighters during a photographic mission in Belgium. After recovering, he received the Silver War Badge in 1919.

Did You Know?
Sgt Clarke returned to Jamaica and was appointed Life President of the Jamaican branch of the Royal Air Forces Association. He is buried at the Military Cemetery at Up Park Camp in Kingston.

Can You ... Find a picture of a Silver War Badge and draw one of your own?
Johnny Smythe was born in Sierra Leone. He enlisted in Sierra Leone’s Defence Corps in 1939, reaching the rank of Sergeant. As a navigator for the RAF in the Second World War, he undertook 27 bombing missions against Germany and Italy. During his last mission in 1942, his plane was shot down and he was wounded. After the war Johnny became a practicing barrister and moved back to Freetown, occasionally lecturing in the United States. In 1953 he represented the Sierra Leone Naval Volunteer Force at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. He earned an OBE in 1978. Johnny was appointed Solicitor General of Sierra Leone in 1961.

Did You Know?

When Johnny’s plane was shot down, German troops found him hiding in a barn. Johnny explains how his black skin proved to be his saving grace at this frightening moment: “The Germans couldn’t believe their eyes. To see a black man – an officer at that – was more than they could come to terms with. They just stood there gazing. I’m sure that’s what saved me from being shot immediately.”

Can you … take a look at a map of Africa and find Sierra Leone?
Ulric Cross was born in Trinidad in 1917. During the Second World War, Ulric trained as a navigator. Ulric, being the only person of colour in his squadron, was nicknamed 'The Black Hornet'. By 1941, he had become expert as a wireless operator and in bomb aiming. He completed 80 bombing missions over Germany. On one occasion, one of the engines of his plane was destroyed by the enemy, resulting in Ulric having to fly over Germany and back to the UK at reduced speed with one engine. Unsurprisingly, in 1944 he was awarded a Distinguished Service Order for his “exceptional navigational ability”. After the war, Ulric went on to study law and had a distinguished career as a lawyer, judge and diplomat in Trinidad and beyond.

Did You Know?


Can you … identify the badge Ulric is wearing in the picture?
Lilian was born in Liverpool to a Barbadian father and Irish mother. Her father had served in the First World War. At the age of eight she was orphaned and brought up in a convent where she stayed until the age of twenty because it was difficult for her to find work. ‘No one would employ me and that’s when I realised I had a problem with colour’ she noted at the time. When the war broke out, she worked in the NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institute) in Yorkshire, but was dismissed seven weeks later when it was discovered her father was Barbadian. In 1941 she enlisted with the WAAF where she trained as an instrument repairer. She was sent to Shropshire where she worked on high speed bombers. Lilian became an Aircraftwoman First Class and was promoted to Acting Corporal. After the war, Lilian went to university and trained as a teacher.

**Did You Know?**
Lilian was one of the first Black British women in the WAAF.

**Can you ...** explain what WAAF stands for?
Arthur Wint
Flight Lieutenant / Olympic Gold Medallist
Years of service: 1942-1947

In 1944, Jamaican born Arthur Wint won his ‘wings’ and saw active service flying Spitfires. He left the RAF in 1947 having reached the rank of Flight Lieutenant. After the war, Arthur won a scholarship to train as a doctor and surgeon at St Bartholomew’s Hospital in London. He returned to Jamaica in 1955, where he had a distinguished career as a doctor in the Hanover parish. He later served as Jamaican High Commissioner in London and Ambassador to Sweden and Denmark from 1974-1978.

Arthur Wint won Jamaica’s first Olympic gold in 1948 in the 400m final.

Did You Know?

In 1952, Wint won an additional gold medal as part of the Jamaican team in the Helsinki Olympics. He was awarded the MBE in 1954.

Can you … name another famous Jamaican Olympic Medallist?
Flight Lieutenant William (Billy) Strachan

RAF Flight Lieutenant
Years of service: 1941-1945

William Arthur Watkin Strachan was born in Kingston Jamaica. In March 1940 he travelled to England to train as a Wireless Operator. He retrained as a pilot and become a Flying Officer before being promoted to Flight Lieutenant. After the war, Billy served as a liaison officer in the RAF, charged with sorting out racial disturbances, before studying law and becoming a legal administrator in London. He was a political activator and member of the communist party until 1967.

Did You Know?
Billy was such a natural that he was allowed to fly solo after only seven hours training!

Can you … Draw the plane Billy flew in 1941— an Avro Lancaster.
Errol Barrow was born in Barbados in 1920. He signed up for the RAF in 1940 and was commissioned as an officer in 1944. He became a navigator and during his time serving in the RAF he went on 45 bombing operations in occupied Europe and Germany, survived six crashes and two bullet wounds in the shoulder. After VE Day, he became the personal navigator of Sir Sholto Douglas, Commander in Chief, British Air Forces of Occupation in Germany. He left active service in 1947, studied at the London School of Economics (LSE), and returned to Barbados in 1950. He became Prime Minister of Barbados from 1961 to 1976, and again from 1986 until his death in 1987. He co-founded the party which led Barbados to independence in 1966 and was the country’s first premier.

Did You Know?
Errol’s time in the RAF gave him the discipline and drive to lead his country to independence. “After that, very little daunts me,” Barrow noted later.

Can You … name three essential items a Second World War navigator would need?
Flight Lieutenant Emanuel (Peter) Thomas

Born in Nigeria, Peter came from one of the richest families on Africa’s west coast. He arrived in Britain in 1941 and qualified as a pilot in 1942, fuelled by an ambition to serve ‘The Mother Country’. In the space of two years, he was promoted twice - to Flying Officer in 1943 and to Flight Lieutenant in 1944. Peter was also a long distance runner and had enrolled in the Territorial Battalion of the Nigerian Regiment. On January 12, 1945, Peter died in an air crash after he was forced to make a crash landing in the mountains. He was just 30 years old. At the time of his death, Peter had already been admitted as a law student to the Middle Temple, as he looked forward to his life after the war.

Did You Know?
Before 1942, no Black African had been granted an officer commission in the RAF, but Peter Thomas was not going to let that stand in the way of his longstanding ambition to join the RAF.

Can you … identify the flag of Peter’s country, Nigeria?
Sam Beaver King MBE
Engineer
Years of Service 1944-1947, 1948-1953

Sam King was born in Jamaica, and joined the RAF after seeing an advert in a local newspaper calling for volunteers to fight in the Second World War. He completed his initial training in Kingston and was posted to an RAF training centre in England where he worked as an engineer until 1947 when he was demobilised and returned to Jamaica. In 1948, Sam returned to England on the ship the Empire Windrush. He re-joined the RAF until 1953. At that time, it was common to see signs such as ‘No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs’ on houses that were available to rent. Buying property was no easier as banks often refused Black people mortgages. Sam set up an organisation to help Black families buy their properties. Later in life, he became a member of the Labour Group in Southwark Council and in 1983 he was elected the borough’s first Black Mayor. He was later to say, ‘The RAF taught me two things, the importance of discipline and the importance of honesty.’

Did You Know?
Nearly one third of the Windrush passengers were ex-RAF veterans.

Can you … name three imports from Jamaica to the UK?
Val was born in Kingston, Jamaica. After studying accountancy, he travelled to England aged just 15 and joined the RAF. A burst eardrum prevented him from achieving his ambition of becoming a pilot. Instead, he became a bookkeeper, a profession which allowed him to develop skills which would prove useful in later life. In 1982, Val launched a newspaper, The Voice, which created a launch pad for many Black media outlets, improving positive representation of Black people in the media. Within eight years, The Voice was selling fifty three thousand copies a week. It was also a training ground for Black and Asian journalists such as Martin Bashir and Sharon Ali who got their start there.

Did You Know?

Val launched The Voice Newspaper in August 1982 at the Notting Hill Carnival.

Can you … Work out how many miles Val travelled to get from Jamaica to England?
Sergeant Shevonne Bramley
Years of Service: 33 years ongoing

Shevonne was born in London to Jamaican parents who were part of the Windrush generation. Her early childhood ambition was to join the RAF. She trained as a weapons inspector and works with the Specialist Engagement Team which highlights the opportunities that the RAF offers young people. Over a service of more than thirty years in the RAF, Shevonne has learnt many skills, including servicing weapons and she has a bomb disposal qualification. There have been many opportunities for Shevonne to travel and she has been all over the world from making bombsites safe in Kosovo to bobsleighing in Norway.

Did you know?

Shevonne feels that by joining the RAF she is able to make a positive difference to society.

Can you ... Draw a bobsleigh?
Past, Present, Future…

Take time to celebrate the achievements and contributions of the Windrush generation; people who arrived in the UK from Caribbean countries between 1948 and 1971.

Then think about all the descendants of that generation and some of the amazing things they have done.

Now it’s your turn…
How will you make your mark?
What might your hero moment be?