

18 September 2014

# Pilots of the Caribbean

## Volunteers of African Heritage in the RAF

Exhibition start date: 6 October 2014

**A brand new exhibition entitled 'Pilots of the Caribbean: Volunteers of African Heritage in the Royal Air Force' is due to open at the Royal Air Force Museum Cosford next Month. The exhibition opening will coincide with Black History Month, a national event celebrating the achievements of black men and women throughout history.**

Curated in partnership with the Black Cultural Archives, the exhibition will tell the inspirational story of these volunteers, commemorating and celebrating their vital contribution to the defence of Britain, her Empire and Commonwealth. Accompanying video footage and artefacts will bring to life the stories of these brave volunteers.

With the outbreak of the First World War, the first black volunteers from the Caribbean, Africa and Britain volunteered to serve with the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), the Royal Naval Air Service and from 1 April 1918 the Royal Air Force. And again during the Second World War these brave volunteers fought, and died, for the mother country and for freedom, and thereby helped to preserve the values and the heritage they shared with their white comrades.

The exhibition will look back at the First World War and the thousands of volunteers from across the empire who enlisted out of patriotism and seeking adventure. As well as fighting men, the Caribbean and African colonies provided vital raw materials needed in the war efforts; mahogany used for making aircraft propellers, cotton for observation balloons and foodstuff including sugar and rice. After serving in the war, the 'colour bar' to enlistment in the Armed Forces was quietly re-imposed.

Nevertheless, on the outbreak of World War Two, the Empire's black populations still chose to support the mother country and young black men were again prepared to risk their lives in her defence. Black volunteers served with all UK-based RAF commands, including Bomber Command which saw four-fifths of African-Caribbean aircrew in active service and Fighter Command which saw the first black volunteers selected to train as fighter pilots in 1941. The only exemption was Transport Command, whose personnel visited countries intolerant of integrated crews.

After the war, most black airmen and airwomen returned to Africa and the Caribbean, proud of having played their part in the defeat of Nazism. Their efforts were rewarded when Britain granted her African and Caribbean colonies independence within the Commonwealth in the 1950s and 1960s. As volunteers were fully integrated into the Service and their ethnic origin was not entered onto their personal records, it is difficult to tell how many black personnel served in the RAF. However, official records do show that together the black volunteers constituted a valuable asset to the RAF.

The RAF maintains its commitment to recruiting the best personnel regardless of race, creed or colour and it is today considered one of the very best employers of people from minorities. The exhibition will highlight

the RAF's success in embracing diversity and demonstrate how the rich, cosmopolitan nature of modern Britain owes much to the black men and women who wore air force blue.

'Pilots of the Caribbean: Volunteers of African Heritage in the Royal Air Force' will be on display at the RAF Museum Cosford from Monday 6 October 2014 in the Museums Temporary Exhibition Gallery, Hangar 1. Viewing the exhibition and entry to the Museum is FREE of charge. For more information visit the Museum website [www.rafmuseum.org](http://www.rafmuseum.org) or call the Museum on 01902 376200.

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- RAF Museum Cosford images & logo available at:  
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