



Caribbean Airmen 1914-1945

Compiled by Captain Mark Johnson

Forebears in the air

BLACK AIRMEN DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR





Eugene Bullard was a black American volunteer & former boxer who flew with the French air force.





‘Robbie’ Clark from Kingston, Jamaica made his way to England and joined the Royal Flying Corps in 1915. He was later severely wounded while piloting his aircraft over Ypres in 1917.





- ▶ **Ahmet Ali Çelikten** flew with the forces of the Ottoman Empire. Çelikten was a half Nigerian, half Turkish pilot who underwent his flying training in Berlin.

Ahmet Ali Çelikten

Almost certainly the very first black airman



There are other untold stories

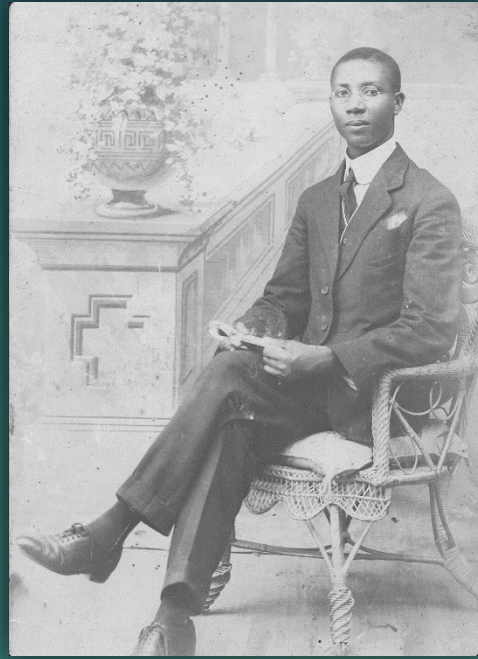
An unknown coloured RFC commanding officer, circa 1918



And even in the trenches

- Lieutenant Walter Tull
- Footballers' Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment
- Battle of the Somme Commissioned 30 May 1917
- Mentioned in dispatches for "gallantry and coolness"
- Killed in action in France, 25 March 1918 during the Spring Offensive
- His body was never recovered.





The Caribbean in 1939

ONE OF THE HIGHEST LITERACY RATES IN THE WORLD

Education, education, education...




Poor but resolute

The Blair family
at Treasure
Beach,
Jamaica, 1930s



The Teacher's
Cottage that
John Blair lived
in, Jamaica,
1930s

RAF losses in 1940

- 
- ▶ 100s of pilots dead
 - ▶ Battle of France lost
 - ▶ Battle of Britain won – just!
 - ▶ A new bomber force is needed
 - ▶ 1,000s of new aircrew are required
 - ▶ An RAF capable of sending 1,000 bomber raids is planned
 - ▶ But Bomber Command losses are also very high:
 - ▶ Over 5% fatalities on each nightly raid, often much higher

Battle of the Caribbean

(*'Operation Neuland'*, 1942)

- ▶ 10 German U-Boats
- ▶ 5 Italian submarines
- ▶ Sent to operate in the Caribbean



Battle of the Caribbean

(*'Operation Neuland, 1942'*)



- ▶ Focus is on oil tankers sailing from Venezuela to US ports
- ▶ 60 merchant vessels are sunk
- ▶ Oil facilities onshore are shelled

Battle of the Caribbean

(*'Operation Neuland'*, 1942)

- ▶ 15,000 West Indians served as merchant crews during WW2.
- ▶ 5,000 of these men died at sea.
- ▶ Eventually US and British air and naval forces drove the Axis submarines out of the region.
- ▶ But the impact on the islands was tremendous:
 - ▶ Loss of vital supplies
 - ▶ No Christmas mail
 - ▶ Fear of a Nazi victory



The 'Colour Bar' is lifted

- ▶ Official policy stated that only '**British born men, of British born parents, of pure European descent**' could receive officer's commissions in any of His Majesty's armed services.
- ▶ Lifted on 19 October 1939.
- ▶ Lifting of the ban allowed British colonial subjects, including black candidates, to officially receive commissions as officers.

The RAF Volunteers

The RAF launches its colonial recruitment drives...

Country	Joined	Killed
Antilles	34	16
Bahamas	9	7
Barbados	35	19
Belize	12	3
Guyana	24	7
Jamaica	172	44
Trinidad	189	45
Other	20	7
Totals	495	148

30% of these volunteers would be killed...



Why they fought



Flt Lt John Blair, DFC, of Jamaica and 102 Sqn RAF:

“Many people don’t think about what would have happened in Jamaica if Hitler had defeated Britain, but we certainly would have returned to slavery.”

'Billy' Strachan

- ▶ Born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica
- ▶ Made his own way to Britain by ship when war broke out
- ▶ Went to the Air Ministry on arrival & offered his services
- ▶ The Corporal who met him at the door told him to "Piss off!"
- ▶ But Strachan was undeterred
- ▶ He persisted and later flew 30 missions as a Wireless Op
- ▶ *Then he re-trained as a bomber pilot...*
- ▶ And flew another 15 missions over Europe
- ▶ Strachan survived the war



‘Billy’ Strachan



He refused to be left out...

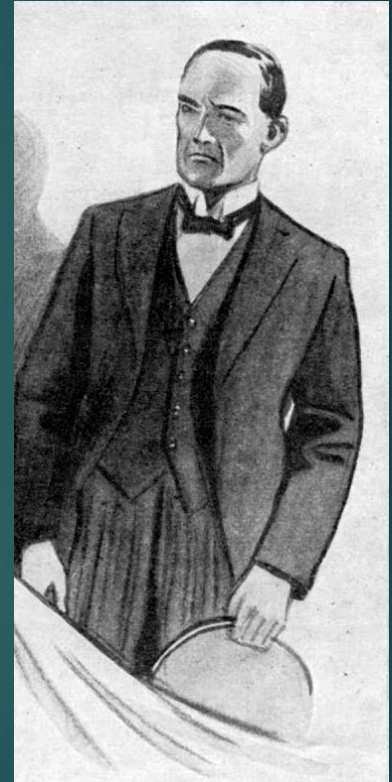
Billy Strachan at Cranwell

'The batman was a very smooth Jeeves type and exactly the kind of character I had been led to expect.

Meanwhile, I was just a little 'coloured boy' from the Caribbean.

When I first met him, I instinctively called this English batman, "Sir".

"No, Sir," the Batman hastily corrected me, "It is I who call you Sir."



Assimilation

A tremendous cultural adaptation was required by both sides...

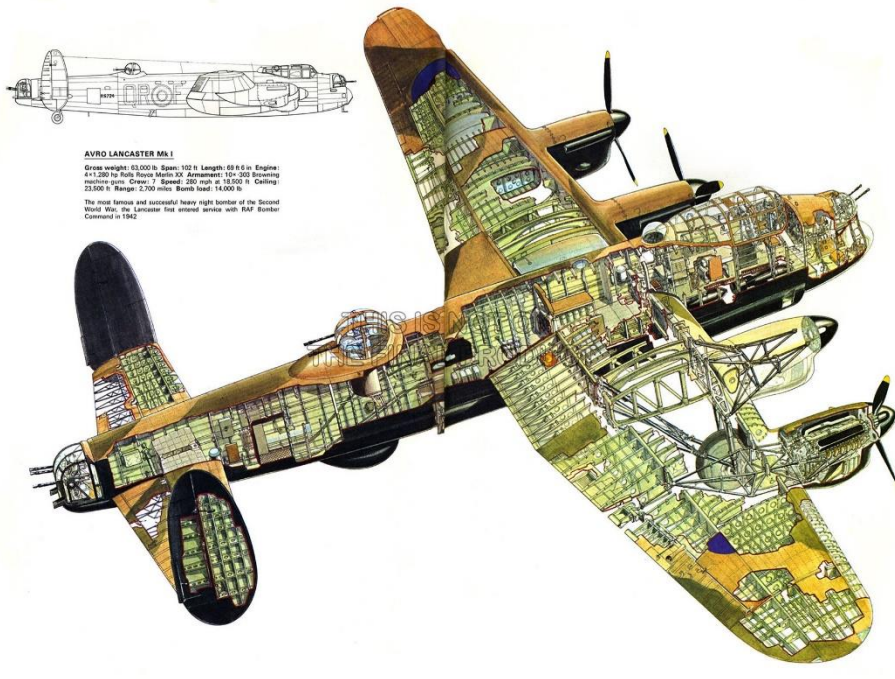


It was achieved incredibly quickly, in the space of just one year.

West African recruitment



- ▶ Aircrew recruitment was also attempted in West Africa
- ▶ It was less successful
- ▶ Only 50 volunteers were selected
- ▶ The presence of Malaria was cited
- ▶ British fear of African independence movements is also a possible explanation
- ▶ Johnny Smythe (left) joined from Sierra Leone and spent two years in Stalag Luft I after being shot down.



Training

“COLD AS THE DEVIL!”



On board ship



Most volunteers travelled to the USA by ship.

They then went on to Canada by train.

Their initial training was conducted at Moncton in Ontario.

When John Blair's party boarded their American merchant ship in Kingston, the white crew refused to accommodate them. The RAF volunteers were sent to travel in the hold.



Learning their trades



Those who qualified as aircrew were assigned various specialities for which they would train:

- Pilots
- Navigators
- Flight Engineers
- Wireless Operators
- Air Gunners

John Blair (left) in Canada, 1943

“I never felt that the RAF training and selection process was conducted on the basis of anything other than merit.”

Crewing up



Flight Sergeant Akin Shenbanjo of Nigeria atop Halifax LW648 with his crew.

'Crewing up' involved groups of men from all trades gathering in a large hanger.

Pilots would walk around and select their crews, going by the look of people.

The black volunteers were all selected.

Black fighter pilots



Flight Lt Vincent Bunting (Jamaica)



Flight Sgt James Hyde (Trinidad)



Killed over Nijmegen, 1944

Weeks and Joseph

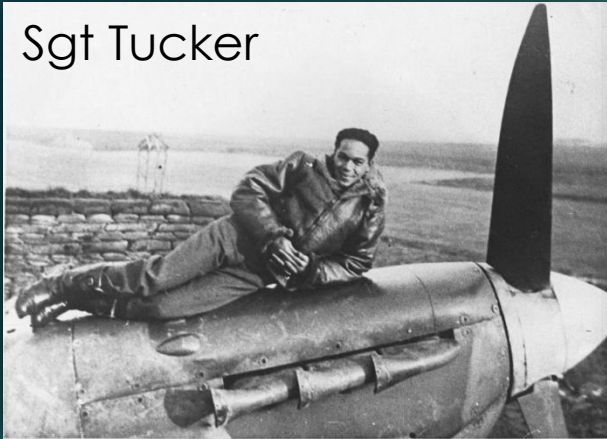


Ft Sgt Joseph of Trinidad (right) was shot down and killed over Europe.

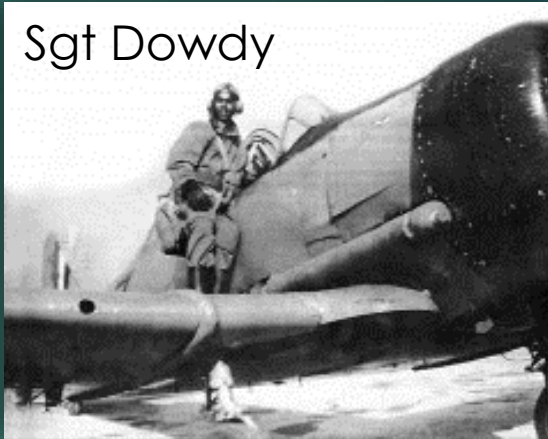
Weeks of Barbados survived the war.

There were many others...

Sgt Tucker



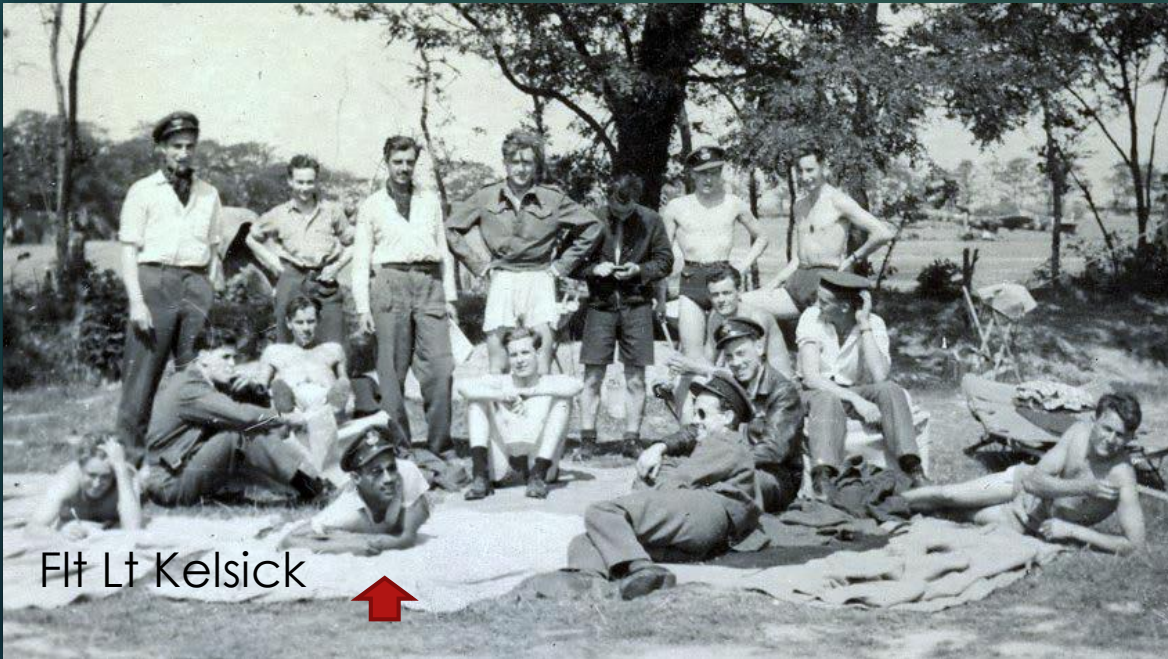
Sgt Dowdy



Victor Tucker flew Spitfires and was killed over France during a sweep on 4 May 1942.

Dowdy transferred to bombers & survived.

Flt Lt Kelsick



Flt Lt Kelsick (Montserrat)

Kelsick flew Typhoons over Europe & survived the war.



Black ground crews

6,000 Caribbean ground crew personnel also served in Britain. Most were trained at RAF Filey in Yorkshire.



Caribbean ground crew arriving by ship.



Carl Chantrielle, 1942

Female volunteers



Lillian Bader was the first black woman to serve in the regular British armed forces. She worked in a technical capacity.



Sonia Thompson from Jamaica was one of a number of Caribbean women who served in Britain.



Accomplished fliers



RAF official report
on Caribbean
aircrew trainees:

'There were no suspensions and the ground and air percentages of 'Above Average' and 'Below Average' suggest that they fall very much in line with the white trainee.'

Experience of racism

Billy Strachan (Jamaican pilot):

'When you arrived anywhere as the first black man you were treated like a teddy bear. You were loved and fêted...

'Two, they coped with...

'It was when three or more arrived that racism really got sharp.'

Caribbean Volunteers at War

"IT WAS A HARD, HARD THING TO DO..."



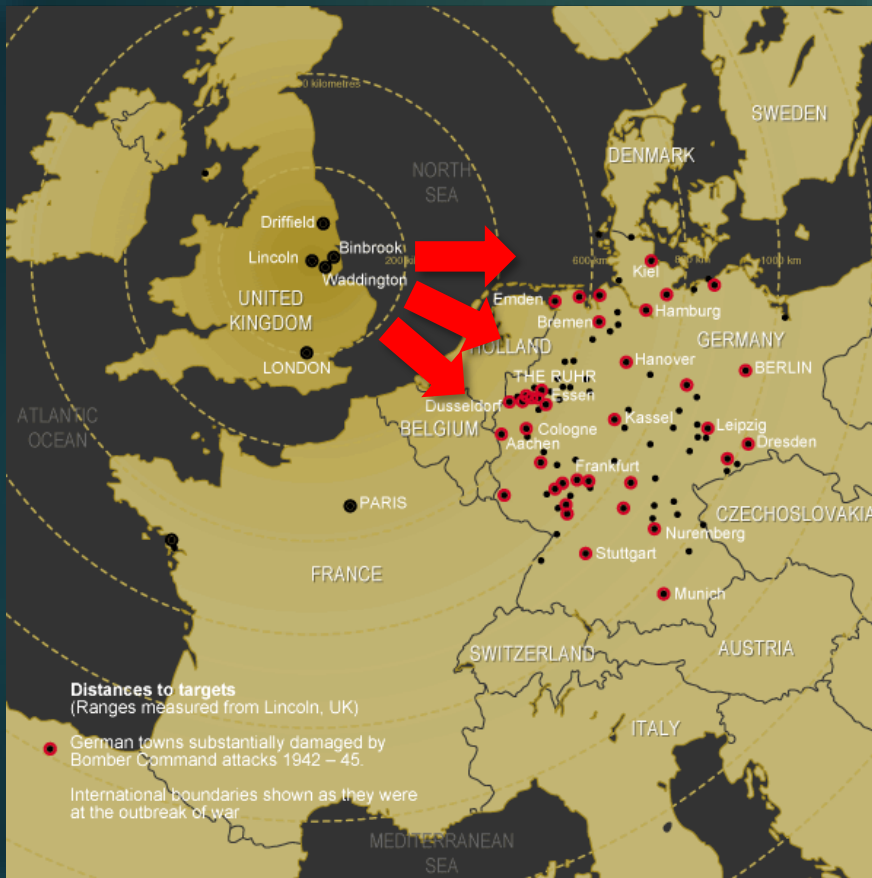


Bombing Germany

Cy Grant, Navigator (Guyana):

‘Even amidst the deafening drone of scores of other aircraft, the muffled explosions below, the glow of the target area, the flak, the sweeping searchlights and the sudden bumps as the aircraft rode the frenzied skies, I never questioned what I was doing there.’

The campaign



‘The aim of the Combined Bomber Offensive should be unambiguously stated; the destruction of German cities, the killing of German workers, and the disruption of civilized life throughout Germany.’

Arthur Harris
Bomber Command

Most RAF Bomber Command missions were flown at night...



**While the US air
forces flew in
daylight.**



Merely navigating to the target was extremely hazardous:

- Up to 1000 aircraft in a stream many miles long
- Collisions and accidents were commonplace



The weather was also a peril:

- Fog and cloud
- Icing
- Rain



Enemy night-fighters prowled like sharks...



Equipped with radar and cannons, German night fighters would approach silently and blast bombers from the night skies.



The odds of parachuting to safety from an RAF Lancaster were only one in ten.

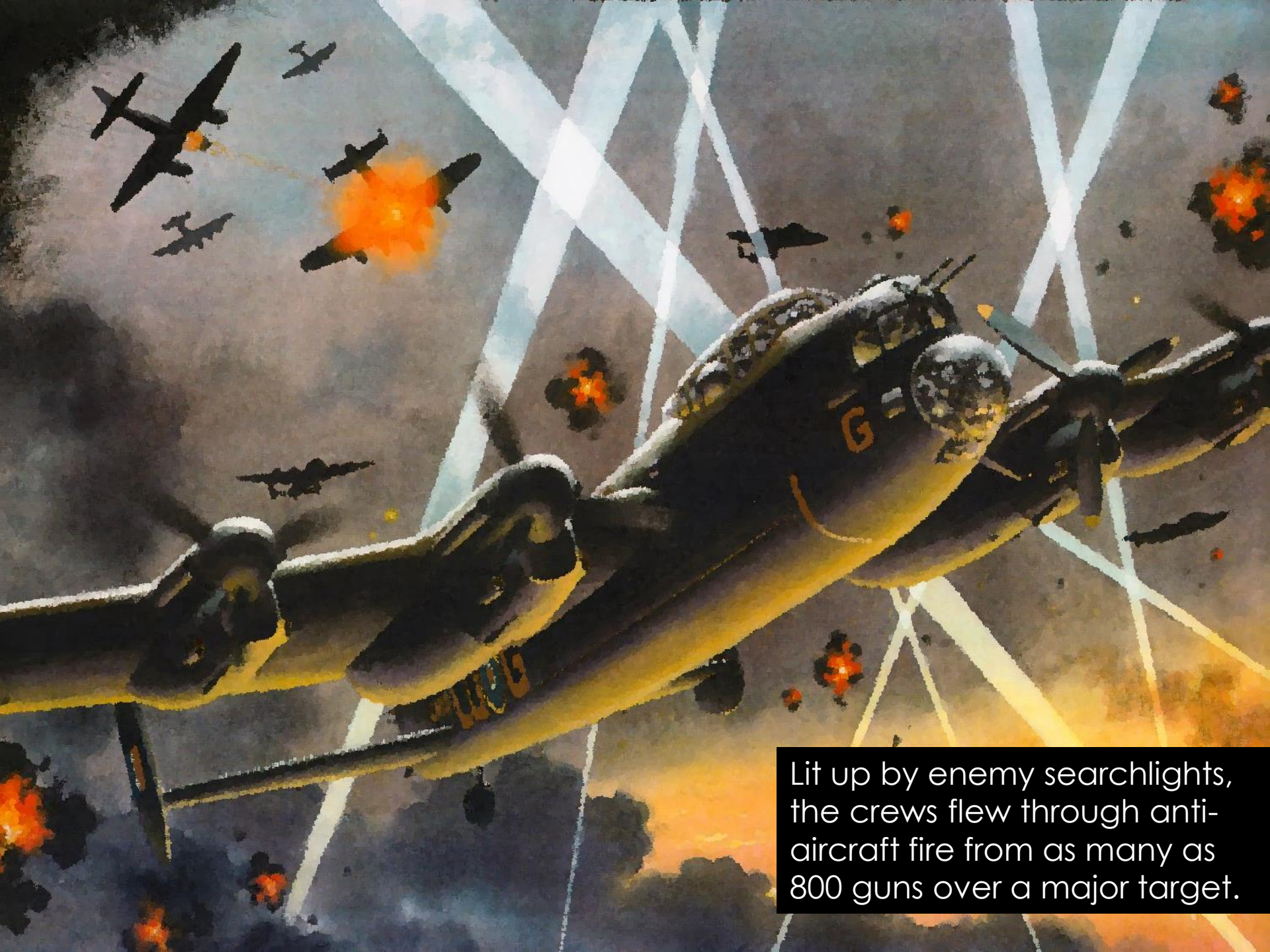


Messerschmitt!



Lincoln Lynch, DFM, tail gunner (Jamaica & 102 Sqn RAF) shot down a Messerschmitt night fighter on his first operational flight.

Lynch survived the war.



Lit up by enemy searchlights, the crews flew through anti-aircraft fire from as many as 800 guns over a major target.



Even bombs falling from above destroyed many an aircraft.

30% of the Caribbean volunteer airmen were killed in action



Down in the North Sea



Sgt Gilkes

Sgt Dickenson

Leslie Gilkes of Trinidad was killed along with his entire crew on 02 August 1943, shot down over Holland. His body was never found.

Dickenson survived the war.

The bombs

'...we can see that the temperatures must have ranged between 1300 to 1400 degrees Celsius and the area lacked oxygen...

Above ground the temperatures must have been even higher (perhaps) as high as 1600 degrees Celsius... Human beings were transformed into ashes.'

Berlin Archaeologist
Uwe Mueller on the
Allied bombing of
Dresden



In addition to rail yards and factories,
civilian dwellings were deliberately
targeted.



German civilian deaths

US Strategic Bombing Survey:

Civilian deaths = 305,000

Wounded = 780,000

Homeless = 7,500,000

Other sources claim up to 600,000 dead, stating that 300,000 died in Dresden alone.



The ethics of bombing

▶ My personal view is as follows:

- ▶ Nazi Germany invaded & subjugated Europe
- ▶ This invasion was unprovoked & illegal
- ▶ Germany perpetrated the Holocaust & other crimes
- ▶ She triggered the deaths of 40 million people
- ▶ Bombing was the only response available to the West
- ▶ There were severe limits on bombing accuracy
- ▶ Germany's cities were thus a fully justifiable target



The Luftwaffe enemy



Heinz Rökner:

64 aircraft kills
(63 at night)



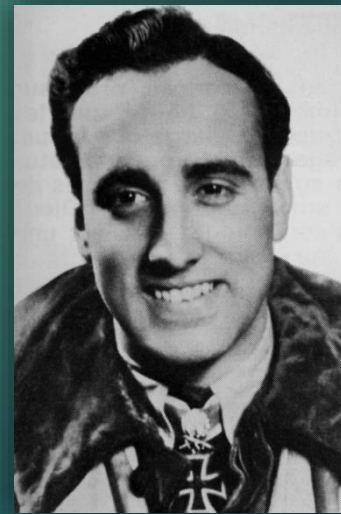
Georg-Hermann Greiner:

51 aircraft kills
(47 at night)



Günther Bahr:

37 aircraft kills
(34 at night)



Heinz Schnauffer:

121 aircraft kills
(114 of them bombers)

Full Tours

“THAT WAS A WAR THAT HAD TO BE FOUGHT...”



Black PoWs

Johnny Smythe – Stalag Luft I



Cy Grant – Stalag Luft III



Cy Grant at Stalag Luft III

- ▶ When Grant arrived at Stalag Luft III he was met by the Commandant, Oberst Friedrich Wilhelm Gustav von Lindeiner genannt von Wildau.
- ▶ Lindeiner took pains to ensure that Grant was well treated.
- ▶ The only racism Grant experienced in the German camp system came from an American flyer from the Deep South.
- ▶ This man could not come to terms with the concept of a black officer and insisted on calling Grant the 'N' word throughout the three years of his imprisonment.

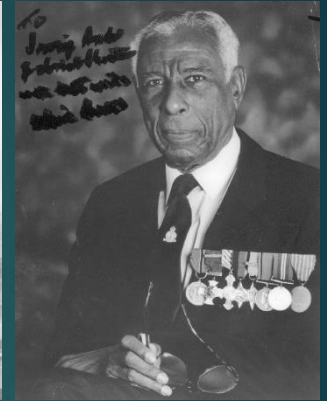


Red Army rescue

In April and May 1945, tanks of the Soviet Red Army broke into central Germany and released all Allied PoWs, including Grant and Smythe.



Eighty missions!



Squadron Leader Ulric Cross, DFC, DSO (Trinidad) flew a total of 80 missions as a Mosquito fighter-bomber navigator over Europe.

After he had completed his obligatory 1st and 2nd tours of 30 and then 20 missions respectively, he volunteered for a further 30.

Ulric Cross died in 2013.

To the Pathfinders



After completing their first 30 mission tour, John Blair and Arthur Wint (Jamaica) both volunteered to join the elite Pathfinder Force, which flew first to the target. They were accepted, but the war ended while they were still in specialist training.

Blair stayed in the RAF until 1963. Wint later won Gold for Jamaica at two Olympics and returned to Jamaica as a medical doctor.

A royal inspection, 1945



Winning gold



Independent minds



- Many of the former airmen became active in the independence movements of the 1960s.
- Their service had convinced them of their right to self government.
- A number attained high office in their new nations.
- But they always remained proud of their RAF history.

The last word



Flt Lt John Ebanks, DFC of Jamaica, was a Mosquito Navigator with 571 Sqn RAF.

Here he is seated (centre) during the 1995 VJ Day celebrations in London

‘I went to fight for *freedom*, for *Jamaica*, and for all the little countries of the world that would otherwise be controlled by *bullies*.’ John Ebanks, 1997

Contact details

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Q & A