

The Caribbean Connection



West Indian members of the RAF Bombay Squadron who took part in Fighter Command sorties over enemy-occupied territory, 1943

By Val Simpson

Very little is known about the contribution of West Indians to the RAF in the Second World War.

Very few West Indians were in a position to even think of joining the RAF to become a pilot. Most of the ones who did, came from affluent backgrounds, with families who were able to help finance and make their dreams possible.

The call to help the Motherland, as Britain was fondly referred to, was answered by nearly 6,000 West Indian men who volunteered to serve with the Royal Air Force and the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) during the Second World War: 5,536 as ground staff and 300¹ as aircrew.

Those who made the long arduous journey by boat would have been at sea for over a week. On arrival they would have expected to be warmly welcomed, but many faced official discrimination when they tried to join the British Forces, even though the





Jamaican volunteers for the WAAF leave the Colonial Centre in Russell Square, London 17 February 1943. Approximately 80 West Indian women came to Britain to join the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). Little is known of West Indian WAAF experiences as their stories were rarely recorded



Squadron Leader Philip Louis Ulric Cross DFC, DSO

formal colour bar had been lifted in 1939. As a result, many signed up with Canada's armed forces.

Between 1940 and 1942, a total of 3,000 West Indian men enlisted in the Royal Air Force. This might seem a drop in the ocean compared to the overall figure for members of the RAF, nevertheless it was enough to make a difference.

In 1943, the Air Ministry approved a scheme for the voluntary enlistment of West Indians for ground trades. Applicants underwent tests in the West Indies and between June and November 1944, some 4,000 West Indians arrived in Britain. A final contingent of 1,551 men arrived in March 1945. The men were trained at the centre for recruits at RAF Fife, Hunmanby Moor, in Yorkshire. Out of the first 2,000, all but seven were posted to training for a special trade, at instructional centres of the RAF's Technical Command.

Of those West Indians serving in the RAF and RCAF, 103 were decorated. The

highest earned were the DFC and the DSO. Squadron Leader Philip Louis Ulric Cross DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross), DSO (Distinguished Service Order) served in No 139 (Jamaica) Squadron RAF Bomber Command, a Pathfinder squadron. He was awarded the DFC in 1944 for his 'exceptional navigational ability' and the number of missions or sorties flown against heavily defended targets in Germany. He was awarded the DSO in 1945. He went on to become a High Court Judge, and a High Commissioner for Trinidad and Tobago. He also had a character based on him in a book called the *The Black Hornet* by well-known author Ken Follett.

Arthur Wint joined the RAF in 1942 and trained in Canada through the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, to become a pilot. He held the Canadian 400m record. In 1945 he was promoted to Flight



Arthur Wint

A thousand West Indian airmen arrive in Great Britain, circa 1944

Lieutenant. He later became an eminent doctor and went on to become the High Commissioner of Jamaica in London.

Flight Lieutenant Vincent Bunting was born in Panama in June 1918 and raised in Kingston, Jamaica. He joined the RAF at No 1 Recruitment Centre, Uxbridge on 26 July 1940. Selected for flying training, he went on to become a fighter pilot, and later joined No 154 Squadron. Whilst leading a section of Mustang IVs from his Squadron on 27 March 1945, Bunting destroyed a Luftwaffe Focke Wulf FW 190 fighter near Lubeck in Germany.

The following passages are taken from interviews featured in the 40th Anniversary magazine publication of the RAF Association (1986):

"Flight Lieutenant John Ebanks (DFM, GSM) was born in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica on 27 July 1919. He started out as a teacher before volunteering in 1941. He sailed with other recruits to Canada, then on to the United Kingdom, where he trained as a navigator. A group of his friends who travelled with him became known as the 11/11 Club of which nine, sadly, did not survive the war.

"My most nerve-wracking experience was the 24th trip; this was over Hamburg. Intelligence advised that the Germans had disabled anti-aircraft coverage from 1,000 to 500 guns. Our aircraft received three hits, putting the starboard engine out of action. Reaching base on one engine was looking more and more remote, and my pilot gave the order to prepare to bail out. I decided to take my chances and stay. We crash-landed safely on the East Coast."

"After the war Flt Lt Ebanks joined Transport Command then accepted a short service commission as a Welfare Officer for West Indian airmen stationed at RAF Benson, Oxfordshire. He returned to Jamaica in 1953. He continued to work tirelessly for the Ex-Servicemen's and Women's organisation and died in November 2004."

The Imperial War museum has a wealth of information. The Commonwealth War Memorial near Buckingham Palace has



Flight Sergeant Vincent Bunting
in conversation with the Station
Commander, RAF Biggen Hill

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Flight Lieutenant John Ebanks
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John Ebanks and another member of 571 Squadron, 1944

many names inscribed in stone celebrating the role of West Indians who served in the RAF during World War Two.

Although many returned to the Caribbean after the war, a few stayed to help rebuild this country. The descendants of these brave men and women are extremely proud to be able to say their grandparents fought in the war to maintain freedom and democracy for later generations.

Sources: Imperial War Museum; Reverend Levi Watson (former RAF airborne radar technician)

Notes

1. Figures contained in letter from Squadron Leader P N Stone, Air Ministry to W J Bigg, Defence and General Division, Colonial Office, 30 October 1942, CO/968/55/14 op cit.

West Indian recruits who have journeyed from Trinidad talk to Lord Moyne, Secretary of State for the Colonies



A group of West Indian ATS recruits