



ALL THE KING'S MEN

Stephen Bourne

In 1914 there were at least 10,000 black Britons, many of African and West Indian heritage, and often fiercely loyal to their 'Mother Country'. Black men joined all branches of the armed forces and black communities made a vital contribution, both on the front and at home. By 1918 it is estimated that the black population had trebled to 30,000, and after the war many black soldiers who had fought for Britain decided to make it their home. While some first-hand accounts relate a strong sense of camaraderie with white fellow soldiers, particularly ordinary soldiers in the ranks, there were also initial barriers to entry to certain branches of the armed forces, prohibitions against promotion, and reports of prejudice from superior officers.

From 1914, British-born black men from all over the country, not just the black communities of the seaports of Cardiff and Liverpool, volunteered at recruitment centres, and they were joined by West Indians and other colonials. The latter travelled to the Mother Country from the Caribbean and other parts of the British Empire at their own expense to take part in the fight against the Germans. Their support was needed, and they gave it.

One of the colonials was the Jamaican Norman Manley. Before he died in 1969, Manley, who served as Jamaica's Prime Minister from 1959-62, detailed his account of his experiences as a black soldier in a British regiment throughout the First World War. This record now serves as a rare example of a black soldier's first-hand account of life on the front line. Manley was born in Jamaica in 1893 and entered Jesus College, Oxford, to read law as a Rhodes Scholar. In September 1915, with his younger brother Roy, he enlisted as a private in the Deptford Royal Field Artillery. Deptford was a working-class area of South London, situated across the River Thames from the East End. Seventy per cent of the recruits Norman encountered identified themselves as Cockneys 'with a view of life all their own'. He said a great affection developed between us. For kindness and generosity I have never met their equal. They soon found out that I did not like being called 'Darkie' and I have heard a real tough guy get hold of a new arrival, who automatically called me 'Darkie', and take him aside and say, "Don't call him that – he doesn't like it". Manley also recalled the time he fell ill, and how his Cockney comrades took care of him, nursed him and looked out for him.

Within a month of enlisting he was promoted to Lance Corporal or Bombadier as they were called in the Artillery, and after four months of training he had had been promoted to Corporal. In stark contrast to the comradeship and friendship he had experienced with the working-class Cockneys when he was a new recruit, he came up against violent prejudice from the rank and file who, he said, 'disliked taking orders from a coloured N.C.O. [non-commissioned officer]'. He recalls, 'their attitude was mild by comparison with that of my fellow N.C.Os. Corporals and Sergeants resented my sharing status with them. They were spiteful and conspired to get me into trouble.'

Manley was disgusted with the racist attitudes he confronted on the Western Front, including that of a Sergeant who placed him on a charge. The Sergeant's rage, recalled Manley,

'born of prejudice', knew no limits. Realising that because of his colour 'there would never be a peaceful relationship,' he gave up his stripes, joined another regiment, and reverted to the rank of gunner (gun-layer): 'In my new unit I built up a most agreeable relationship with everybody. They respected and liked me and would follow my leadership in any circumstances. I liked them as men and as human beings.' For his war service, Norman Manley was awarded the Military Medal.

There is a misconception that black soldiers were segregated from their white comrades in the British army during the First World War. While their African American counterparts were forced to serve in separate units in the American army, this was not the case in the British army. After Britain joined the First World War on 4th August 1914, black recruits could be found in all branches of the armed services. Page 471 of the Manual of Military Law (1914), stated that "any negro or person of colour, although an alien, may voluntarily enlist" and when serving would be "deemed to be entitled to all the privileges of a natural-born British subject." However, a note indicates that their promotion to commissioned rank was to be prohibited. This shows that black soldiers could not be promoted to officers and explains why the British-born Walter Tull, and others, were commissioned.

Historian Jeffrey Green, author of *Black Edwardians* (1998) notes: 'My understanding is that the distinction was drawn between officers and rankers [ordinary soldiers], the former having authority over the latter. The conscription laws applied to all male citizens and the 1914 Manual of Military Law said the volunteers could enlist. The Manual did not bar anyone. I suspect recruiting officers may have had different opinions but there seems to have been no law that excluded black men from being enlisted. An assumption is made that, because officers could not be black, rankers could not be black. There are enough photographs of blacks in standard regiments to show that they were not siphoned off into 'ethnic' regiments such as the British West Indies Regiment. Imagine a recruiting station somewhere in Britain before conscription. A bunch of lads turn up and volunteer. How many sergeants or officers would say that one (or more) of the group of pals could not be accepted? Excluding blacks would upset the other reluctant recruits who were only there because they had to be there. Turn down one and the others would be aggrieved.'

In recent years, the professional footballer Walter Tull (28 April 1888 – 25 March 1918) has become perhaps the best known and most celebrated black British soldier of the First World War. The second person of mixed race to play in the top division of the Football League, he enlisted in December 1914, suffered shell shock, returned to action in the battle of the Somme and was decorated with the 1914-15 star and other British war and victory medals. Commissioned as an officer in 1917, Walter was mentioned in dispatches for his 'gallantry and coolness' at the battle of Piave in Italy in January 1918, but two months later he was killed in No Man's Land during the second battle of the Somme. For decades he was forgotten, but books and television documentaries have now ensured Walter his place in British history. However, he did not exist in isolation. With the centenary of the First World War from 2014 to 2018, there are many other black British soldiers who have been overlooked in the history books and need to be acknowledged.

Many black servicemen, like Walter Tull and Norman's brother Roy who was killed in action in 1917, made the ultimate sacrifice and died on the battlefields but, with the passage of time, with the exception of Walter, the contributions of Britain's black servicemen have been forgotten. It is hoped that the centenary of the First World War will change that.

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