

# The Service and Legacies of Black Caribbean and West African RAF Wartime Service Volunteers

## Introduction

The 'Hostile Environment' fostered by the British government's Home Office in 2013 generated the Windrush Scandal; a system of deportment of long-settled Caribbean migrants to the U.K. The policy sent shockwaves across the United Kingdom as associated stories hit the headlines and terrorised numerous communities. However one upshot of events was the emergence of Windrush Day, commemoration of what is now an increasingly famous voyage of migration of the troop carrier *Empire Windrush* to the 'Mother Country', mainly from Caribbean islands to Tilbury Docks, London. Whilst this allowed a new recognition of what came to be known as the 'Windrush Generation' (the term in fact referencing migrants from 1948 to the early 1970s) and incorporated passengers from many walks of life, there is no denying this slice of Black British History inextricably connects to the Royal Air Force, who maintained a majority of the passengers on the voyage amongst their ranks.

The 'Pilots of the Caribbean', a phrase far more recently coined for these particular service volunteers, were far from just pilots! Of around 5,500 volunteers from the region, around 450 found their way to pilot and aircrew duties. Since the stories of some of these individuals have (re-)emerged, their collective contribution to the war effort, cultural influence both post-war and directly to the evolving RAF, remain under-researched. Through individual case studies, examination of the interactions between the institutions of the British Empire military (predominantly looking at the RAF), Colonial Office and home nations, this research intends to provide a comprehensive assessment of the impact of these service volunteers, not only on combat, but also cultural identity of the service itself.



***"When I joined the Royal Air Force in the 1970s, I had no idea there were African and Caribbean people like Peter Brown who served in World War Two."***

Donald Campbell, 71, founder and director of *The Forgotten Generations* charity and RAF veteran of 36 years' service.

This research is a timely matter – with its legacy very recently making national news. In December, 96 year old Jamaican RAF World War Two veteran Flight Sergeant Peter Brown died alone in his Westminster home. Initially thought to have had no remaining family, the situation shifted relatively quickly as a collective search began to find out as much as they could about him. He is thought to be one of the last, if not the last, of that generation.

***"I wish I'd known about people like Peter because it would have given me the confidence to say, my forebears fought for this country, some of them died, so I have a right to be here...There are so many Peter Browns out there whose stories are of benefit to future generations."***

There is an appetite amongst multiple communities, whether service personnel, current or former, civilians of the Windrush generation, and local communities in which veterans lived their lives, to see the memories and legacies of these service volunteers reach the audiences they deserve to, that is to say, far larger ones than they have to now. Increased academic foundations in these matters will aid the ability to both cement these stories within RAF history, Black British history and British academia as a whole. Through examination of RAF service records, relevant archives, secondary reading with relation to the roles of military institution, opportunities through interaction to learn of and from the other colonies and Dominions of the British Empire, and where possible, oral histories from family members, it is intended to identify each influential aspect of their whole story.

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## Acknowledgements include:

Olusoga, David, *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, Picador

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12123955/Farewell-one-Pilots-Caribbean-Hundreds-turn-funeral-WWII-veteran.html>, referenced 30/5/2023

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