

BLACK HISTORY

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All Blood Runs Red



Gene Bullard

BY JAMIE H. COCKFIELD

Gene Bullard went to war with this slogan painted on his plan. He was America's first black aviator—but he did not fly for America.

His flying career already behind him, Bullard wears the uniform of the French 170th Infantry and the Croix de Guerre awarded him for gallantry at Verdun in this 1917 portrait.

America's first black aviator, Eugene Jacques Bullard, flew not for his own country but for France, for which he was wounded and almost died. Gene Bullard wore fifteen French medals and decorations, and although he was buried in the United States, it was in a French military cemetery and in a French uniform. He served France not because he did not wish to serve his own nation, but because to the French the color of his skin did not matter. To the leaders of his own nation, it did.

Bullard began as a young adolescent an argosy that carried him all over the American Southeast. He walked, hopped freight trains, traveled endlessly, not knowing where he was going. He worked odd jobs on farms in Georgia, Alabama, and finally Virginia, where at Newport News he found his big ocean. He sneaked aboard a German freighter headed for Europe, but he was discovered two days out and put off in Aberdeen, Scotland. He did not return to his native land for almost thirty years.

Bullard was puzzled by the Scots, and they by him. Most had never seen a black man, and he was stared at on the streets. Yet he was never mistreated. People would approach him, shake hands, and invite him home to tea. He had trouble understanding their language, which to him it was "sort of like English"

and made him feel as if he were hard of hearing.

Young Bullard held a number of jobs in Scotland; then he moved to Liverpool, England, where he worked as the live target in a penny-a-throw carnival sideshow, a job that paid two shillings a week—money enough to allow him free time, which he spent at a local gym, running errands and doing odd jobs for the fighters. His quick, warm smile and sunny nature made him popular, and one of the boxers, Aaron Lester Brown—the "Dixie Kid"—took Bullard under his wing and taught him how to fight. Bullard had bouts in London and even North Africa; then, late in October 1913, Dixie booked him to fight Georges Forrest in the Elysee Montmartre in Paris. Bullard was just nineteen.

In his autobiography Bullard wrote, "When I got off the boat train in Paris, I was as excited as a kid on Christmas morning." When Dixie asked him how he felt, he could only say, "I am happy, happy, happy." After winning the fight on points, he went back across the Channel, prepared to do anything to return to France. He joined a traveling road show called Freshman's Pickaninnies, a slapstick comedy group with which he went to Berlin and even Russia. When the show got to Paris, he deserted.

France was everything his father had said it would be. For the first time he lived among white people who did not pay special attention to the color of his skin. He learned the language quickly, and with it and some German he had picked up in Berlin he became an interpreter for foreign boxers. He led a happy life until the following August, when the Great War began.

By late 1914 the French nation had sustained a half-million casual-

ties, and among them were a number of Bullard's friends. His fondness for them and for his new country spurred him to join the Foreign Legion, and he was inducted into the French Army on October 19, 1914. After hasty training Bullard was assigned to the 170th Infantry, which contained fifty-four different nationalities.

His first major action was the Battle of Artois, in which the French sustained 175,000 casualties in two days, for a net gain of only one and a half miles of ground. Of the 4,000 legionnaires who went into action, only 1,700 answered roll call the next day. Bullard went on to fight in Champagne and, like almost every soldier in the French army, at Verdun.

In spite of a competitive nature honed by his boxing career, Bullard did not like killing. "Every time the sergeant yelled 'Feu!' I go sicker and sicker. They had wives and children, hadn't they?"

It was here in 1916 that Bullard received the wound that removed him from the ground war. He was leaving the line to get reinforcements when a German shell exploded nearby, and he felt a terrific blow against his left leg and was knocked unconscious. When he revived, he had a hole in his left thigh and "was not expecting to get very far before receiving a surplus hole somewhere else." After spending a day in a disabled ambulance, Bullard was eventually taken to a hotel turned hospital in Lyons. A wealthy local family, the Nesmes, had offered their home as a convalescent center and took Bullard in after he was able to walk. There he met Lyons society and many influential friends of the family, who warmed to the big, cordial American.

Bullard gained his first bit of fame during his convalescence when he was interviewed by Will Irwin for

The Saturday Evening Post. Describing Bullard as "a great young black Hercules, a monument of trained muscle," Irwin observed that a year and a half of war had made of him a "strange creature," not at all like "the negro we knew at home." War had given Bullard "that air of authority common to all soldiers... He looked you in the eye and answered you straight with replies that carried their own conviction of truth." Irwin noted that the "democracy" of the French Army had rubbed off on Bullard, and he had grown accustomed to looking on white men as equals. There was already a trace of French accent in Bullard's rich Southern black speech, said Irwin, and when he grew excited, he slipped easily into French.

In Lyons Bullard began to think about becoming a flier. Military aviation was still new, and infirmities that would keep one out of the trenches might not prevent a soldier from taking to the air: The leading British ace was blind in one eye; his French counterpart had been rejected for service in the trenches. In the Nesme home Bullard met Commandant Ferroline, the head of the French air base at Brun. One night Ferroline asked Bullard what his plans were for the remainder of the war.

When he expressed uncertainty, Ferroline offered to have him transferred to the French Air Service. Bullard was ecstatic. "Imagine hearing that you really might have the opportunity to be the first Negro military pilot."

He was soon told to report to Cazaux, near Bordeaux, on October 16, 1916, and then to training at Tours. He received his flying certificate on May 5, 1917, a two months later he was sent to Avord, the largest air school in France, where he was put in charge of the sleeping quarters for an outfit made up of American flying for France. One American who served there wrote: "This democracy is a fine thing in the army and it makes better men of all hands. For instance, the corporal in our room is an American, as black as the ace of spades, but a mighty white fellow at that. The next two bunks to his are occupied by Princeton men of old southern families; they talk more like a ducky than he does and are the best of friends to him."

Bullard always made a strong positive impression on those he met. James Norman Hall and Charles Bernard Nordhoff, the future authors of *The Bounty Trilogy*, also wrote about the air war. One of them was waiting one day in the office of Dr. Edmund Gros, the American administrator of the Lafayette Flying Corps—the most famous unit of Americans flying for France—when the young black pilot entered. He described the scene: "Suddenly the door opened to admit a vision of military splendor such as one does not see twice in a lifetime. It was Eugene Bullard. His jolly black face shone with a grin of greeting and justifiable vanity. He wore a pair of tan aviator's boots which gleamed with a mirror-like luster, and above them his breeches smote the eye with a dash of vivid scarlet. His black tunic, excellently cut and set off by a fine figure, was decorated with a pilot's badge, a Croix de Guerre, the fourragere of the Foreign Legion, and a pair of enormous wings, which left no possible doubt, even at a distance of fifty feet, as to which arm of the Service he adorned. The eleven-pilotes gasped, the eyes of the neophytes stood out from their heads, and I repressed a strong instinct to stand at attention."

Yet no orders came for Bullard. Other Americans who had joined the French Air Service after him passed through the barracks he supervised on their way to the front, but Bullard remained. In time he began to hear that Dr. Gros opposed the idea of blacks in the flying corps, and he was the chief reason that Bullard was not given an assignment.

Annoyed, Bullard threatened to call his influential French friends. He was forbidden to do so, but someone called on his behalf, and finally he was ordered to report to Le Plessis

Belleville, a training school near Paris and a last stop on the way to the front. He was assigned in August to Spa 93, his unit in the French Air Service, which operated in the region of Verdun-Vadelaincourt-Bar-le-Duc, an area known by the fliers stationed there as "a little corner of Hell," and several weeks later he was transferred to the nearby Spa 85, where he remained until he left the French Air Service.

On the fuselage of his Spad Bullard had painted a bleeding heart pierced by a knife under which were written the words: *Tout le Sang qui coule est rouge!* (which his biographers generally translate as "All blood is red.") He was a celebrity now, mobbed by American newspaper reporters, and this newfound fame may have prompted him to make the first contact with his father since he had run away. He wrote to Columbus, begging Octave Bullard's forgiveness for his disappearance. His father replied, granting that forgiveness but also giving his son the grim news that the Georgia he had left had changed little. Gene's brother Hector, who had dared to claim publicly some land he had acquired in Peach County, and a mob had lynched him.

Bullard's first flight orders came for September 8, 1917. He was to fly reconnaissance over the city of Metz. When he saw his name posted, he felt that he was "headed for heaven, hell, or glory" but also felt "ready for anything." He went up that day and from then on never missed a sortie.

In his flying career Bullard scored two "kills," but only one of them was confirmed. He wrote that the first was from Baron von Richthofen's Flying Circus, but the hit was unverified because the Fokker crashed behind enemy lines. No doubt Bullard had shot down an enemy plane, but it could not have been from the ed Baron's squadron, for he never operated in the Verdun sector. After the flight that day Bullard counted seventy-eight bullet holes in his plane.

His second kill, early in November 1917, however, was definite. On one of those cold, misty days typical of northeastern France in the late fall, he was patrolling twelve thousand feet over Verdun when his squadron was jumped by German Pfalzes. Bullard singled out an enemy plane and attacked; his intended victim went into an Immelmann turn, flying nose up and then turning backward, to come in from behind. Bullard dodged into a cloud bank. When he emerged, his foe was above him to the right, but Bullard was able to pull in behind him and bring him down.

Whatever pleasure he took in his victory was dashed once again, however—first by America, then by France.

Between the wars Bullard had several jobs, including managing a nightclub called *Le Grand-Duc*, where he made himself at home.

After the United States entered the war in April 1917, the government extended an invitation to all Americans flying for France to accept commissions in the Army Air Corps; aviators had only to apply and pass physical. Bullard sent in an application and was invited to Paris for the examination. The physical was conducted by five uniformed doctors. They had Bullard's record before them, yet they asked all sorts of questions that were unrelated to his health, such as "Where did you learn to fly?" as though his papers had somehow been falsified.

Bullard pointed out that he had been in many dog-fights. They gave him his physical and announced that he had flat feet. He said he did not fly with his feet. He then learned that he had large tonsils. He said he had never lost one day flying because of throat trouble. They said he was colorblind but finally approved him. And that was the last Bullard ever heard from the American government.

Years later, after Eleanor Roosevelt wrote of Bullard in her column "My Day," he sent her a note of thanks and asked rhetorically, "Was it my flat feet or the color of my

skin [that kept me out of the Army Air Corps]?" It would be sixteen years before the American government commissioned a black aviator.

Not long after this bitter episode Bullard was hurt again, this time by the nation he had come to call his mistress. On November 11, 1917, he was summarily removed from the French Air Service, and five days later he was transferred to his old 170th Infantry unit, where he performed menial, noncombat jobs in one of its service units until the end of the war.

Bullard stayed in France after the war, trying his hand at a number of things. He wanted to resume his fighting career, but his war wounds prevented that. He took up the drums and eventually assembled his own band, which played in nightclubs in the Montmartre section of Paris; he managed a nightclub and later owned his own bar and his own gym for fighters. Those interwar years were good ones for blacks in Paris, and many African-Americans—artists, writers, and performers—followed Bullard's example and went there to live, forming what the French called the *culte des negres* and the *tumulte noir*. At one point Bullard gave Langston Hughes a job washing dishes. For what was probably the first time in his life, Bullard was making a good living.

It was in these years that he married and started a family. His painter friend Gilbert White had introduced him to Louis Albert de Straumann and his wife, the Countess Helene Heloise Charlotte de Pochinot, and after the war he became a frequent visitor to the Straumann home, where he met their only daughter, Marcelle. According to his autobiography, he did not understand the feelings that had come over him. When Marcelle was not with him, he felt "lonely and uneasy"; when they were together, he felt "happy all over." Finally he revealed his feelings to the Straumanns, expressing the fear that he was "crazy." Both parents broke into laughter at how long it had taken him to discover that he was in love; their daughter had realized it long before.

The two were married on July 17, 1923, at the mairie of the Tenth Arrondissement. The wedding caused some buzzing, not because Bullard was black and his bride was white, but because she was so socially prominent and he was unknown. The couple honey-mooned in Biarritz. Eleven months later their first child, Jacqueline, was born, followed in 1926 by a son, Eugene Jr., who lived only a few months. A second daughter, Lolita Josephine, was born in December of that year.

Bullard was very happy at first, but as the decade wore on, his marriage soured. Marcelle, wealthy in her own right, wanted her husband to give up his work and jaunt about Europe with her and her friends. Content to stay in Paris and reluctant to live off his wife's money, Bullard refused. The couple separated in 1930, with Bullard gaining complete custody of the children. Marcelle died young of a lung ailment in 1936; Bullard never remarried.

As Nazism grew more powerful in the 1930's so did Bullard's loathing of it. When, in the late spring of 1940, the full fury of the Nazi war machine fell on the west and smashed the Allied efforts in the Battle of France, Bullard's friends urged him to flee the country; the color of his skin would make him likely to be rounded up and shot by the Germans. Having placed his daughters in safe hands, he left Paris with fifteen hundred francs and a knapsack filled with canned goods, sausages, crackers, and bread. But he was not fleeing the Germans. He was heading for his old unit, the 170th Infantry. He learned it was at Epinal, in northeastern France, but soon after found out from the hordes of refugees and defeated soldiers that Epinal had already fallen. Hearing that the 51st Infantry was making a stand at Orleans, Bullard began working his way

Continued to page B