

# Black History Month

## Black Aviators Usher in New Century

*Pilots were pioneers in world at war*

BY RON WEBER  
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In our nation's history at war, African-Americans stood in long lines and pleaded to fight for the freedom that was reserved for the white population. Often they were turned away from the United States military or assigned low support positions where they were not allowed to handle a weapon or be near a combat zone.

Black Americans fought as far back as the Revolutionary War under hopes of winning their freedom. In the Civil War, they knew that freedom was just around the corner, but a victory by the South would jeopardize that.

African-American men and women were also proving that a black person could do anything a white could. The more they succeeded, especially in prestigious fields like aviation, military combat, politics, education and literature, the more they proved their point.

As the famed white aviator Amelia Earhart was getting her pilot license in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, so was an African-American woman, Bessie Coleman.

Had Coleman not been turned away in America and forced to go to Europe, she would have been the first woman in the skies. While she worked two jobs to earn enough money to go to France and take up flight instruction, Earhart beat her to the punch.

In France, Coleman learned aviation stunt tricks and eventually performed treacherous feats that



Facing discrimination at home, African-American pilot Bessie Coleman proved her aviation skills in Europe.

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Amelia would have never even thought of attempting. Coleman proved beyond a doubt that being black meant nothing in terms of being less than a white person.

Another prime example was Eugene Jacques Bullard, a Georgian-born American fighter pilot in World War I.

Bullard faced the common discrimination of the day in America. To better his employment opportu-

nities, he emigrated to England where he worked several jobs and became a champion boxer, fighting all over Europe and the Middle East.

In 1914, Bullard joined the French Foreign Legion. After being injured seriously while fighting on the front, he fully recovered and volunteered for service in the newly formed French Aviation Corps. As a member of the Swallows of Death regiment,

he became known as the "Black Swallow of Death."

While he was accredited with shooting down two enemy planes, it is very possible that he actually shot down more than that. Before cameras on planes, a pilot only got credit if someone saw him down another plane. Fighting high in the skies amidst much smoke, noise, gunfire and much confusion, he may have

been involved in more combat than we actually know.

Bullard's desire to fight from the cockpit would come from the pure excitement of flying, a desire to feel the power of aerial combat and a challenge to show others that the black race can do anything whites can do.

Because of his success in the skies the doors opened all over the world for other black pilots. One of these was Bessie Coleman

who became the first black American woman pilot just four years after Bullard shot down a German warplane over France.

Three decades later, African-American pilots fought for our nation's freedom during World War II. But first they had to fight for equality.

Faced with discrimination and accusations that they were not intelligent enough to learn how to maneuver a plane, African Americans had to battle in both houses of Congress, in governors' mansions and the White House. Strategic commanders argued against the idea while human rights activists and black soldiers argued for it.

Finally Congress passed three laws between 1939 and 1940 that opened some civilian and university flight schools to black pilots, created a black pilots military reserve, and prohibited discrimination based on race in terms of pilot induction, selection and training.

Following the passage of these laws, the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron began operation, which led to the famed Tuskegee Training Program. Maxwell Field, Alabama would become their training ground.

Ron Weber is a regular speaker on African American history and a frequent contributor to the Portland Observer.

Bessie Coleman was America's first black woman pilot.



African-American Eugene Jacques Bullard served as a pilot in the French Aviation Corps.

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