

A contribution (DV14) to our series "Distant Voices"

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[www.ecctai.org](http://www.ecctai.org). This article is also published by Gabriel at [academia.edu](http://academia.edu) with further illustrations



Around seven thousand British West Indians - including my father seen here - served in the British armed forces during World War II. When Britain declared war on September 19, 1939, the Royal Air Force (RAF) itself was compelled to overcome the prejudices of the time. After the defeat of France in 1940 and the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk, Britain found itself in dire straits. With advocacy by progressive Britons and British West Indians who spoke out against segregation, the RAF, to its credit, integrated its ranks. Around 7,000 British West Indians rallied to freedom's cause and served as fighter pilots, bomb aimers, air gunners, ground staff and administration. No other colonies, or group of nations, contributed more airmen to the RAF during World War II. This is even more remarkable, and their commitment more profound, given the small populations of the islands. Several Africans from Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone also became officers in the RAF, with the most notable being RAF Flight Lieutenant Johnny Smythe of Sierra Leone, who was shot down over Germany on his 28th mission and survived imprisonment in the famous Stalag Luft One.

Not only did the British West Indies provide men to the Royal Air Force and the overall war effort, but the individual islands raised funds to purchase aircraft. It is of note that "The Bombers for Britain Fund" was started in 1940 in the British West Indies. The Daily Gleaner newspaper of Jamaica started the fund, on the urging of a farmer by the name of Alec Gordon who had been inspired by the fighting spirit of Winston Churchill. Gordon, swept up in patriotic commitment and a desire to defeat fascism, decided to play a part. It is said he donated £100 pounds to the "Bombers for Britain Fund" - a princely sum in those days. It was planned that the fund would go

towards buying a single bomber for the Royal Air Force. So overwhelming were the many subscriptions to the fund that the target for one bomber was met in one week. With such outstanding support the fund was then expanded to purchase an entire squadron of bombers. The subscription start by The Daily Gleaner raised £75,000, which helped to purchase 12 Blenheim bombers. These bombers were used by the 139 (Jamaica) Squadron, they flew low level to penetrate German lines and conduct daylight bombings. The money Jamaica subscribed was the foundation of the "Bombers for Britain" Fund, to which many other Colonies and Dominions subsequently contributed . In recognition of this service it was decided, in the words of Lord Beaverbrook, the wartime Minister of Aircraft Production, "that Jamaica's name shall evermore be link to the squadron of the Royal Air Force". And so it was that No. 139 Squadron became No. 139 (Jamaica) Squadron.

Some of those who served:

Squadron Leader Phillip Louis Ulric Cross, DSO, DFC (1917-2013) of Trinidad; served in 139 (Jamaica) Squadron, Royal Air Force, Bomber Command . An ace navigator, Cross went on to become a senior court of appeals judge In Trinidad, Attorney General of Cameroon, founder of the Industrial Court of Tanzania, and later Trinidad & Tobago's ambassador to Germany and High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. He did 80 missions over occupied Europe with the RAF Pathfinder Force and was decorated for excellent navigational skills and exceptional devotion to duty.

Flight Lieutenant Billy Strachan of Jamaica (far left) served in Lancasters as a member of the aircrew in Royal Air Force Bomber Command in World War II. He was one of 7,000 British West Indians, primarily of African ancestry ,who served in the Royal Air Force in World War II: most in ground crew. About twenty thousand British West Indians served in the British Army, Royal Navy, WAAF, and Merchant Marine.

Flying Officer Julian Marryshow of Grenada flew Spitfires in 602 Squadron Royal Air Force The British West Indian Airmen, like their Tuskegee Airmen allies who served in the US Army Air Corps, came from societies that had once set severe limits on the liberty of those of African descent. After the war, both the Tuskegee Airmen and the British West Indian veterans — in particular those from the RAF — became leaders for beneficial social change for their countries. Their successes spurred the cause of self-determination in the British West Indies and assisted the independence of Africa.

Pilot Officer Lacombe Alphonsus McCoy – of Dominica (A Member of the late 1930s Dominica Grammar School Cadet Corps – My old unit)  
1394216 – L.A.A. McCoy – Leeward & Windward Islands – attested 17.7.41 – Ach/Obs Pilot Office, Royal Air Force – commissioned 17.10.42- Missing believed killed See [www.caribbeanaircrew-ww2.com](http://www.caribbeanaircrew-ww2.com)

RAF Pilot Officer Errol Barrow led his island of Barbados into independence. Flight Lieutenant Dudley Thompson became Jamaica's Minister of Foreign Affairs after successfully defending Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta during that country's independence struggle. Thompson also assisted the formation of Tanzania's Independence Party led by Julius Nyerere. Pilot Officer Milton Cato became the Premier of St. Vincent. RAF Squadron Leader Phillip Louis Ulric Cross, DSO, DFC of Trinidad & Tobago became a judge in Ghana, a special emissary of Kwame Nkrumah's government to Congo's new President Patrice Lumumba, and Attorney General of Cameroon. He finally retired as a judge from his nation's highest court.

Flight Lieutenant Cy Grant of then British Guiana, the navigator in an RAF Lancaster Bomber was shot down over Holland and captured. He spent time in Stalag Luft III and knew of the "Great Escape" but could not take part.

RAF Flight Lieutenant Cy Grant of Guyana, an internationally known thinker, writer and entertainer, became the first person of African descent to have his own show on BBC television. Grant's legacy was the creation of [caribbeanaircrew-ww2.com](http://caribbeanaircrew-ww2.com), along with webmaster Hans Luitwik, the son of the Dutch farmer who assisted him after his Lancaster Bomber was shot down over Holland. His capture in 1943 in the uniform of the RAF caused consternation, as his presence contradicted the Nazi philosophy that persons of African origin were subhuman and incapable of handling aircraft. Grant's photograph was shown on the front cover July 1943 issue of the Nazi party's national newspaper, Volkischer Beobachter, with the caption "We have captured an officer of the Royal Air Force of indeterminate race."

Private Wendell McKenzie Christian of Dominica (1921-2011) British Army, "C" Company Windward Islands Battalion, South Caribbean Forces. Most of his unit garrisoned the islands at a time when marauding German U-Boats sunk 445 allied ships at or about the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean during World War II. Other members of the unit served in the Caribbean regiment sent to Egypt and Italy in 1944.

In all it has been a fascinating journey working to unearth these stories of the British West

Indians from relatively small islands who made an outstanding contribution to victory in World War II.

My interest in ensuring this history preserved and made known is also in tribute to our father Wendell McKenzie Christian, LSM (1921-2011), a veteran British Army, South Caribbean Forces (1943-1947) whose stories of the war and the stirring oratory of Winston Churchill shaped his life. In 2009 we captured the service of British West Indians in Britain's military, spanning two centuries, in a groundbreaking book. That work was by me and Canadian Judge Irving W. André ; "For King & Country – The Service and Sacrifice of the British West Indian Military (Pont Casse Press, 2009). Other works have followed in our wake. The late Cy Grant who cooperated with me in co-authoring the book was the one who introduced to me to Hans Luutwik referenced earlier, the son of the Dutch farmer who had helped save his life when he was shot down over Holland.

By overcoming barriers erected by man's inhumanity to man, these veterans — like the Tuskegee Airmen — ushered in a new and better world. Their sacrifices opened the way for others to rise and so expanded the bounds of freedom. And so, today, we celebrate those who, by taking flight in freedom's cause, allow humanity the opportunity to defeat the scourge of fascist tyranny and ensure the survival of humanity and its link to democratic values.

This historical rendition, in salute of the Tuskegee Airmen and their allied British West Indian flyers that volunteered to serve in the Royal Air Force in World War II, was brought to you with the compliments of the West Indian American Military Members Association of Andrews Air Force Base and the Law Offices of Gabriel J. Christian & Associates, LLC as part of Caribbean Glory – A Tribute to the British West Indian Military Veterans of World War II (June 19, 2009). See here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvG6Z1ICYJY&feature=youtu.be&t=1m39s>