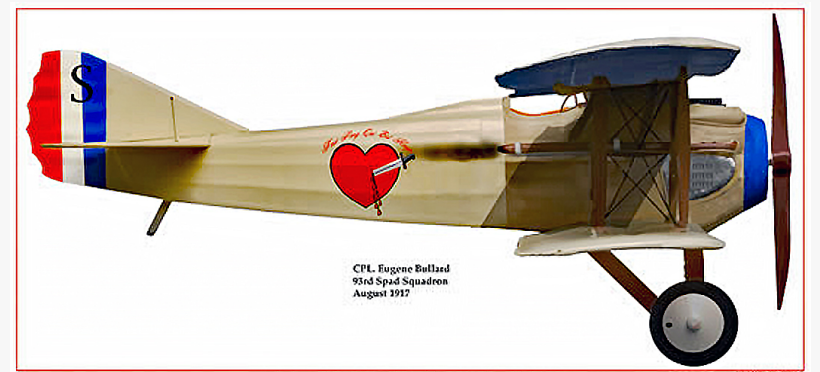


EUGENE J. BULLARD, BLACK SWALLOW OF DEATH

By Colleen Adair Fliedner

EUGENE JACQUES BULLARD was the only African-American pilot to fly in combat during World War I, as well as the first African-American fighter pilot in history.

SAN MATEO, CA, US, February 24, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Not only was EUGENE JACQUES BULLARD the only African-American pilot to fly in combat during World War 1, he was the first African-American fighter pilot in history. Completing at least 20 brutal combat missions, including what were termed "dog fights in the sky," Eugene was proud to be called the dreaded "Black Swallow of Death" by German fighter pilots.



ALL BLOOD RUNS RED

Now a fighter pilot with the Escadrille Spa 93, Eugene had a heart with a dagger stabbing through it and the words, "All Blood Runs Red," painted on the side of his airplane, a Spad 7C.

So, how did the son of a slave, a man who was born in Georgia in 1895 during the time of the notorious Jim Crow laws, become the world's first African-American fighter pilot?

Living in the South, Eugene James Bullard grew up constantly facing racial violence. His own father, William, was nearly lynched. Even worse, the incident was witnessed by young Eugene. His mother, a full-blooded Creek Indian, died when he only 6, leaving her 10 children to be raised by their father. It was all too much for the boy to take. Unable to cope, he ran away from home in 1906 when he was only 11 years old, wandering through the South simply trying to survive.

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Alone in the world, the first known work that the youngster found was tending to the horses of a group of traveling "Gypsies" (now known as Roma people). He must have done well, for he learned to ride and later raced their horses to earn money for his employers, who had become his friends.

Still, the seventeen-year-old longed for more. Traveling around America, he had heard stories about how life was better for people of color in Europe. Eugene said goodbye to America and stowed away on a German merchant ship. The vessel made a stop in Aberdeen, Scotland, where Eugene disembarked. He made his way to London, finding work as a slapstick performer with an entertainment troupe made up of men and women of African descent. It was during this time that Eugene discovered his skills as a boxer. In fact, he was so good, he traveled to various destinations in the U.K., Germany and other countries, including Egypt. Audiences everywhere applauded the unusual man who had become something of a sensation. His fame and his fortune began to grow.

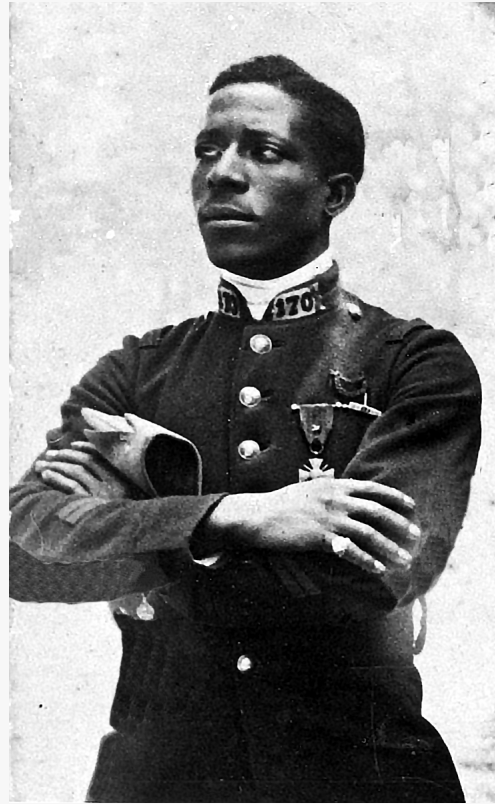
When he traveled to France for a boxing match, Eugene found the peace he had sought his

entire life. African-Americans were accepted as human beings and treated fairly. France was a place where he was treated like a man, where he could have dignity and respect. Paris became his permanent home. It was a place, he wrote where, "...French democracy influenced the minds of both black and white Americans there and helped us all act like brothers."

He was so happy in France that when World War I broke out in 1914, Eugene enlisted in the French military. He served in the 170th Infantry Regiment but was severely wounded at the bloody Battle of Verdun. He received two metals for his bravery: the Croix de Guerre and the Medaille Militaire. Recuperating at a hospital in Lyon, he decided to give himself a new challenge – to fly one of the French fighter planes. He entered the Aeronautique Militaire in 1916 and received training at a French base in Tours earning his wings a year later.

Now a fighter pilot with the Escadrille Spa 93, Eugene had a heart with a dagger stabbing through it and the words, "All Blood Runs Red," painted on the side of his airplane, a Spad 7C. As if he wasn't already the most unique pilot flying for France, he had a pet monkey named Jimmy as his "copilot." Eugene was brave and determined to prove himself. And when America finally joined the Allied forces in 1917, Eugene, who still considered himself to be an American despite his bad memories of home, attempted to sign up as a pilot for the U.S. Air Service. Sadly, he was turned down. The American military didn't allow African-Americans to serve as fighter pilots. Discouraged, he returned to flying for France. Some sources say he had a confrontation with a French officer, while others say the U.S. military instructed the French government to remove Eugene as a pilot. What we do know is that despite his success as a pilot and the awards of honor he had received, Eugene was fired as a pilot and was sent back into the infantry for the rest of the war.

When things began to settle down in Paris, the ambitious man used his savings to open a nightclub, Le Grand Duc, an American bar he called L'Escadrille, and an athletic club. Now a successful businessman, he married a French woman, Marcelle de Straumann, who gave birth to



Eugene Bullard in his French uniform, 1917



Eugene Bullard places flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

his two daughters. For the first time, Eugene settled into a stable, yet exciting life that included meeting many rich and famous people, including F. Scott Fitzgerald and Josephine Baker.

Things changed around 1940 when the Nazis occupied Paris. German soldiers and turn-coat Frenchmen, known as the Fifth Columnists, frequented Eugene's nightclub and bar. Because he spoke fluent French and German, he could eavesdrop on the frequently drunken discussions, sharing the information with the French counterintelligence network.

Now in his mid-40s, he enlisted as a machine gunner to fight again for France. And once again, Eugene was severely injured. His recuperation was long and difficult, and Paris was still an occupied city when he learned that the Nazis were rounding up Blacks and shipping them to concentration camps. It was time for Eugene Bullard, a national hero in France, to finally return to the United States. He had divorced his wife, but brought his daughters with him to New York, settling in Harlem. After a life of adventure, turmoil, and heroism, this amazing man disappeared from history.

That is, until Eugene had taken a job as an elevator operator at the RCA building in New York City. When his identity was finally discovered, he was interviewed on The Today Show in 1954. As a result, he was invited to France as one of three honored men to relight the flame of the Unknown Soldier in Paris. He was presented with France's highest honor, a national Chevalier (knighthood), his fifteenth award bestowed by the French government. He returned to Harlem, where the honors continued when French President Charles De Gaulle traveled to New York City to personally meet with the hero who had done so much for France during both world wars. Eugene Bullard died in Harlem in 1961. Three decades later, the American military posthumously commissioned him into the U.S. Air Force as a second lieutenant. The National Museum of the U.S. Air Force in Dayton, Ohio, has a display to honor his memory. And the McDonald-Douglas Corp. donated a bronze bust of Eugene Bullard to the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum.

This brave man who had to leave his own country to find a place where he would be accepted as an equal. This special man who had been turned down because of his race when he applied to join the U.S. forces after America declared war on Germany in 1917. This man, Eugene J. Bullard, certainly deserves to be remembered for his many accomplishments, particularly during Black History Month. We can only hope that Eugene Bullard's amazing story will be made into a movie. Tyler Perry? Beyoncé? Anyone?

Colleen Adair Fliedner is the author of a World War I story entitled [In the Shadow of War: Spies, Love and the Lusitania](#), published by Sand Hill Review Press.

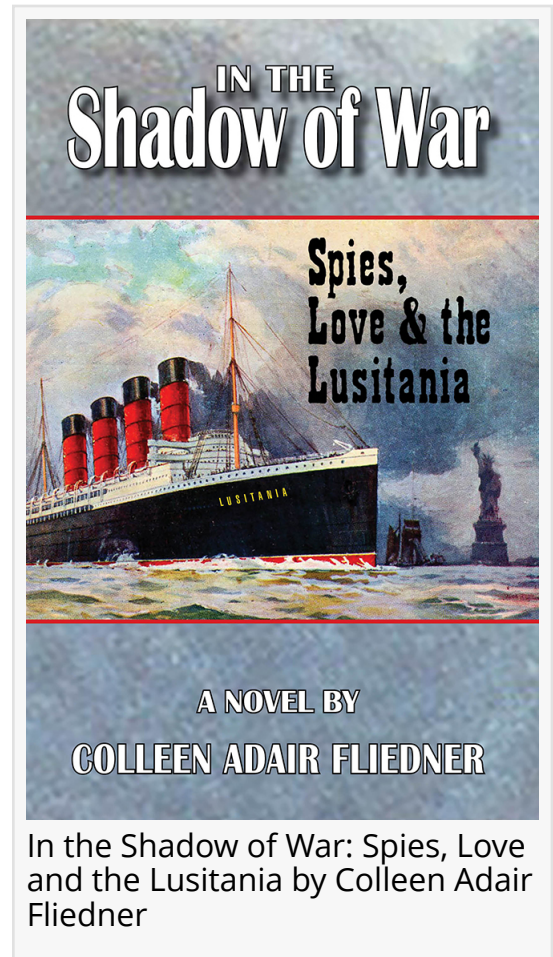
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