

## Audio file

[2023-06-20-enfac-tfh-ep6-StephenBourne.mp3](#)

## Transcript

### **INTRO**

#### **Dr Joseph Quinn:**

During the Second World War, thousands of servicemen and women drawn from across the Commonwealth and Imperial territories came to the defence of the UK by volunteering to serve in the British and Commonwealth forces. The service of one particular group has caught the popular imagination during recent years and has recently come to our attention with the funeral of Flight Sergeant Peter Brown, who was buried with full military honours last week. Brown was originally from Jamaica and like 4,000 fellow West Indian men and women who volunteered to serve in the British uniform, he came to Britain to join the Royal Air Force, serving as a wireless operator on Lancaster bombers. His death last December in 2022 marked the passing of one of the very last of the "Pilots of the Caribbean".

But who were the black servicemen and women who served this country during its hour of need? Where did they come from? Why did they decide to join the armed forces and how were they rewarded for their service in the post war world? Joining me today to discuss this is author and historian, Stephen Bourne, who is the author of *Under Fire: Black Britain in Wartime 1939-1945*, which was published in 2020 by The History Press. In this book, he deals with the contribution that Black Britons and volunteers from the West Indies and Empire territories made to the British war effort, and how the legacy of this service has impacted modern Britain today.

Stephen, you're very welcome. I am going to begin by asking you about the origins of black service in British uniform.

#### **Stephen Bourne:**

There was always a history of service from the black community, from the empire as it was known, I would say for centuries. I'd written a book before *Under Fire* called *Black Poppies*, where I focused on First World War black servicemen in the First World War, and certainly there was a major contribution from black British-born men, men from the West African colonies from the Caribbean, and it's an extraordinary kind of story that that can be linked to the Second World War.

And yes, there's always been that tradition, in the Navy especially, and the Army.

#### **Joseph:**

And what got you interested in this topic in the first place? Why did you decide to focus on this particular subject matter? Because black service in the armed forces across two world wars is something that you've covered in quite a lot of depth.

What got you interested in this in in in the first instance?

**Stephen:**

In the first instance, I would say that it came from my family. My kind of predominantly white working-class family. I had an adopted aunt who was black and British, born in London in 1912. So, my interest in black British history, and particularly the Second World War, started when I was very young. The older women in my family, including Aunt Esther, always talked about the London Blitz and air raids and food rationing and the terror and the trauma that they had to live through in that time. The Armed Services came a bit later.

Because, as I discovered, as I was growing up, people like my Aunt Esther and her father, Joseph, who was from Guyana, were not in the history books I'm talking about. When I was a teenager in the 1970s, there were no black British history books. Well, very few, none that I was aware of until I was a little bit older. But there were a few around that I wasn't aware of. But really what drove me to do this research and to uncover these stories was the fact that I was always fascinated by the Second World War. Not battles - I'm not really a military historian, not at all! It was really the everyday lives of people on the home front, in the Armed Services and they just weren't acknowledged in World War 2 books. Historians who were, when I was growing up, predominantly white middle class, dare I say, Oxbridge academic types?

You know, they had a very fixed and very, as I discovered, very narrow view of Britain, and the fact, as you say, that thousands of men and women from across the colonies supported the British war effort in World War Two - they were never acknowledged. There may occasionally be a tiny little reference to Ken Snakehips Johnson, the Guyanese band leader, being killed in the London Blitz in March 1941. There may occasionally be a tiny reference to Leary Constantine, the famous cricketer who became a welfare officer for the government, looking after West Indians who came to this country being discriminated against by a hotel in London in 1944, which he challenged and took to court. But they were just footnotes, there was no... it took years and years and years of painstaking work on my part to kind of gather these stories together.

But what I learned Aunt Esther and the older women in in my family was that first hand testimony was paramount to my method, if you like. I never use - you notice I stopped at the word method just before I was going to say 'ology'. Well, I won't say 'ology'. I never used words ending in 'ology' in my work. In other words, I'm not an academic. I don't consider myself from an academic background. I found a different route to documenting history. And it was primarily - not exclusively, but primarily about talking to older people about their experiences.

**Joseph:**

So you don't like using the word methodology, but one of the things I've noticed about your book is that it does employ a particular method - an anecdotal method. So you refer to various sources, quotations, so you employ a very - you sort of fuse together, in not too far off an academic style if, if you would like to take the complement. But one of the things that I noticed - one of the things I honed in on, was that you went to the very backdrop of, I suppose, the black experience during the Second World War, and you begin at the very beginning of the conflict.

And it leads me to my next question, which is how many black Britons were there in Britain upon the outbreak of war. Or how many do we think there were?

How large was Britain's black ethnic population at that particular time?

**Stephen:**

No one can answer that question. No records were kept either in census, or... Well, there's a 1921 census which I wouldn't have had access to as it only recently was made public. There's no 1931 census. To my knowledge, there is a 1939 Register of England and Wales which was made accessible just before I started writing *Under Fire*.

The ethnicity or country of origin was not recorded, neither was ethnicity or country of origin recorded in the Armed Services in Britain in the two world wars, unlike America, who were very race conscious, much more than we were in this respect. So if you go through American census, or censuses, if there's such a word, everyone's ethnicity is recorded. And, so, if the 1911 census, for example, or the 1939 Register had included ethnicity, we would have a much clearer idea, but we don't. And I'm even loathed to put a ballpark figure on it because I have dealt with it in my books, because people like to know how many were there.

When I was younger and starting out on this wonderful journey or learning curve, historians would dismiss the black contribution to the Second World War, because they would say - the rationale that they gave - this is traditional British historians, not all of them, but those that were, you know, that were asked this question - 'there weren't enough to warrant inclusion in our books'. The numbers were so small that they were insignificant. So I taught myself early on to reject that, and should concentrate on individuals experiences.

You mentioned the RAF guy from Jamaica who was recently given a funeral by the RAF. We'll never know how many will like him. We'll never know the numbers and how many were lost to history because their ethnicity wasn't recorded. So, in hindsight, in some ways it's a shame we didn't record race in the 1911 census. Then, we'd know - have a better idea of how many black people there were in Britain in the First World War, and in the 1939 Register. But I wouldn't even attempt to put a figure on it. Thousands? You know it's - it's what those people's lives were in this country and in the Armed Services during the Second World War - that's what's important to me.

**Joseph:**

There is a scene in the film by Joe Wright, *Atonement*. And it is a scene involving 3 main characters who make their way to the Dunkirk beachhead, where the British Expeditionary Force is awaiting rescue. And one of those soldiers is identifiably black and he has what we could associate with a London accent. And it begs the question, or it led to the question, which I think was featured in national newspapers at the time, were there black British soldiers at Dunkirk?

And this is something that you mentioned in your book, something that came up in a conversation between you and the historian, Joshua Levine, about whether there had been any black soldiers at Dunkirk. What did you discover?

**Stephen:**

Well, I knew of a few examples. Again because there's no official documentation, we'll never know for sure. All I would say is that from the research I've done, I've come across Patrick Nelson from Jamaica, who is with the British Expeditionary Force and was captured and interned. As was the son of George Arthur Roberts, who was mixed race, born in South London, Peckham, and was in the Army, and was interned in a prisoner of war camp for almost the entire duration of the Second World War. He was captured at Dunkirk.

What we need to remember is that after the Second World War, particularly in the 1950s, there was a whole succession of war films, Second World War films, Dunkirk (1958) with John Mills, The Dambusters famous film, Richard Todd, Kenneth Moore, Reach for the Sky. Endless films! The Wooden Horse, and so on and right into the 1960s, but only one in the 1950s had a black face. And that was a black RAF - I don't know whether he was an officer. I don't know his rank. He doesn't have any lines, and it's a film called Appointment in London (1953) and there's this tiny scene with Dirk Bogard and some RAF chaps in the mess, and there's this black guy just standing there, very tall, very handsome. But somebody had the foresight to put him in there. But no other British film from that period, or indeed the 1960s, right up until the end of the 60s - Battle of Britain, Michael Caine, and an all-star cast, ever acknowledged that presence. And so, when Atonement was released, and I saw it, I was like, OK.

Now that was probably, I don't know, I haven't spoken to the director, colourblind casting. I don't know if the character in the novel, the original novel, was black. I doubt it. I haven't read the novel. So it could have been based on fact, or it could have just been an example of colourblind casting. But it wasn't, you know, being cast irrespective of their race. But it but it resonated with me, as indeed it would have resonated with a lot of black people who might have seen that film. And so questions would have been asked: a black man, a black soldier at the Dunkirk Evacuation? Well, yeah, because there would have been some. And that's how I kind of perceive that film. As a breakthrough, really.

**Joseph:**

Yes, well, it did seem to be a watershed in terms of – a surprising watershed, one that one that I think people didn't really expect and of course there have been some film portrayals of black service in the British and or Commonwealth forces.

You did have one film, and not one that people rate particularly highly, Escape to Victory, where you had Pelé, for instance, represented as a soldier from Trinidad who was a particularly talented footballer who was sort of an ace player on the Allied team within that particular movie. But generally speaking, the representation of black service within British film and within Hollywood portrayals of the British war effort had not really been very overt, not very prominent, and it was in recent times that this whole question about service came to the fore, and you referred to this in your book.

But this leads us to the next question, which is the colour bar. I wanted to ask you why was there a colour bar applying to service in British uniform? Why was it enforced and why did they eventually decide to lift the colour bar?

**Stephen:**

Well, to be specific, there wasn't a colour bar as far as I'm aware in the Navy. There had always been for centuries black merchant seaman. I don't think the army had a colour bar because Ramsey Bader joined at the beginning of the war, and I think his brother was in the army as well. So there were black recruits into the British Army, but it wasn't popular with black men. They prefer the glamour of - what they called the glamour of the RAF, the Royal Air Force, was considered more of a glamorous option, particularly if you were from the Caribbean and you wanted to get out of the colony, in the oppressive world of the colony, you know, let's go and join the RAF.

But the RAF did have a colour bar at the beginning of the war. It's not clear why. Is it just a simple case of racism? Is it more complicated than that? Certainly, in the First World War, the Royal Flying Corp welcomed William Robinson Clarke from Jamaica, who was a pilot in the First World War very heroic. I put his story into my book *Black Poppies*, but even he was erased from history and wasn't rediscovered. Not by me, but by the RAF Museum, when they found a photograph of him. And so, twenty years on, after the First World War when the Second World War broke out, the shutters had come down. The RAF didn't want black recruits and then, in 1940, Battle of Britain, the decimation of the RAF, combined with the pressure from people like Dr Harold Moody who was a black community leader in Britain - and he was already campaigning for the Army to allow his son, who was British-born, Harold Arundel Moody, to be commissioned as an officer but the army wouldn't allow that. I mean, he could join as an ordinary recruit into the army in 1939, but he couldn't be commissioned as an officer but he qualified as a commissioned officer. He'd been to Dulwich College, I think - not a public school, but pretty much of that kind of background. So Harold Moody, who was a forceful campaigner and activist, the sort of doctor Martin Luther King of his day - and we had Dr Howard Moody, who was amazing guy - he won that battle about his son being commissioned as an officer in the Army.

But it took a while for the colour bar in the RAF to be lifted and it wasn't until right at the end of 1940, the beginning of 1941, that men from the Caribbean and West African colonies were able to join up. So you had people like Ulric Cross from Trinidad who joined the RAF and went on to become one of the most highly decorated black servicemen of the Second World War. He survived the war. Peter Thomas from Nigeria joined the RAF. He was one of the first recruits from West Africa - he joined at the beginning of 1941. But he already had in his camp, so to speak, the colonial chap - can't remember what it was called in Nigeria - fighting his corner saying, 'this man should be in the RAF'. But sadly Peter did not survive the Second World War. He was killed in a terrible flying accident right at the end of the war.

And also let's not forget women. Black women from the Caribbean were not allowed to join up at all, and there was a constant battle going on through the war. But it wasn't until 1943 that that particular colour bar was lifted so black women were able to leave the Caribbean and join the Auxiliary Territorial Service or the WAAFs, the women's air force. But there were examples of black British women joining the Women's Air Force before that, and one of them was a dear friend of mine, Lillian Bader, whose story is in the book with her husband, Ramsay Bader, for have been in the army. So it was a bumpy ride, so to speak, but then I think with the RAF, because of the decimation of the RAF during the Battle of Britain, they had no choice. They couldn't keep turning down black recruits.

**Joseph:**

It's one of the things actually that has been very much brought to the fore in recent times, particularly with the Pilots of the Caribbean initiative that the RAF Museum recently undertook, and there was - there's been very concerted efforts by the RAF Museum and by sort of cultural heritage professionals connected with the Royal Air Force to try and sort of again, rescue, preserve whatever you want to call it, the history of black and ethnic minorities.

**Stephen:**

Can I can I cut in there? I mean the RAF Museum has done amazing work, but even before that I was part of the Black and Asian Studies Association. We were unfunded, never funded. We were just a group of historians of black Britain who formed this kind of group in 1991, and some of us campaigned with the Imperial War Museum, and with other people in the community, not just us, for the Imperial War Museum to take this subject, obviously, and to catalogue their archive, their collections and highlight the black contribution to the Second World War in the Armed Services and in their collections.

But it took a long time and it was not until about 2001-2002 that the War Museum started to invite me and others to come and give talks for Black History Month because Black History Month have become established by them and I would go to the Imperial War Museum every October. I loved it and I would give a talk about mainly the home front. I focused on the home front at the beginning, so home - British people on the home front and that went on for years until they axed it. They were there before the RAF Museum.

But you're right that certain organisations like the War Museum, the RAF Museum started to take this subject seriously, but it wasn't - but it was from pressure from outside and some pressure from inside those organisations to change that and, in fact, with the Imperial War Museum in 2008, I was well-enough established with them to be invited to be part of a Steering Group, a consultation group of about eight of us on the group for their 'War to Windrush' exhibition, massive exhibition that they had. At the Imperial War Museum, it was fantastic experience - acknowledged the black contribution to the Armed Services the Second World War. And I think, if I remember right, it was so popular with the public that they extended it for several months because people kept flooding in to see it.

**Joseph:**

This is one of the things that I was going to come to. It was the - the incredible popularity of this subject matter and the tremendous desire to recognise, as we saw with the funeral of Peter Brown, there was this outpouring of public emotion and a great desire to give this man the best send-off possible in recognition for his service and a tremendous sadness that the memory of men like Peter Brown had almost very narrowly been forgotten.

**Stephen:**

You see the black community knew - they always knew, because they would have had great uncles or grandfathers or great grandfathers or even great aunts or grandmothers that served either in the First World War or the Second World War. When I went - started out giving talks on the black contribution to the Second World War, whether it be *Under Fire* or the home front - people would come up to me and tell me stories, share stories that they knew - the black community knew. The

problem was it wasn't written down. There were no - there were very few books around that - focused primarily on the First World War and the Second World War. Which is why when *Black Poppies* was published in 2014 for the Centennial of World War One, to the publisher's surprise, it took off like a rocket because there was nothing else. Nothing else that was contained in a slim, accessible volume. And David Olusoga did a huge book called *The World's War* which came out just after *Black Poppies*. But that's not necessarily an academic book, but it's a weighty book, a huge book, whereas my little *Black Poppies* book was thin - and condensed and precise.

And I said I would say to black people, "Why did - what drew you to the book?" They said, the title and the photograph on the cover of the black World War One sailor and the black World War One soldier. And so that image resonated and the title resonated during that because no one else during the World War One Centenary - I could not get arrested by the BBC and yet the BBC had a whole department doing World War One programmes. That side of my work is pretty awful, so there was no kind of recognition in that respect.

But the book took off and I think to answer your question it - it's simply that black people in this country have always, whether whatever background they're from, whether it's - Cardiff or Liverpool, or Devon. Whatever background their families from, they knew, they knew they had a history. They knew that that their ancestors had made a contribution to the two world wars. They just didn't have the detail, and that's why I think the Peter Brown phenomenon almost, you know, it just escalated. It escalated from - what was going to be a small little service in Mortlake Crematorium to this massive sort of thing that made - was on the media, was on the BBC.

Ironically, you know, it's like and yet, these are the institutions. That have kind of sidelined and marginalised this story, but now we're in a different world. Sort of Black Lives Matter, sort of - what's happening now - there's more of a consciousness.

**Joseph:**

I wanted to actually ask you a question directly about this. Has there been a magnification of this particular subject matter because of the impact of the Windrush scandal and also Black Lives Matter, the origins of that movement in 2020? Do you think that that's amplified the coverage of this and the public interest, or do you think the public interest was building long before that?

**Stephen:**

Possibly, possibly, but from a personal view, I'll be totally honest with you, no, I haven't had this media queuing up to interview me. It's so the book - I get very frustrated when I hear nothing's ever been done. Nothing's ever been done. But lots of us have been doing stuff and it's like, but because we're marginalised and not given - our work and the people in our books are not given the attention unless you're someone like David Olusoga, for example, with a huge media profile.

And he is brilliant. I mean, he really deserved his honorary BAFTA the other night because of his contribution to television. He's done phenomenal work. But he's a known entity. He's a known person. He's proven - you know he's got. It's almost like an industry kind of thing and a worthy one and one that I welcome and embrace. But there's lots of others like myself who've been doing work even longer than David, who don't get - I have to emphasise this, whose work doesn't get that kind of recognition. So, with a few exceptions like the Imperial War Museum's War to Windrush

exhibition in 2008, my own 'Keep Smiling through black Londoners on the Home Front' exhibition, which I did at the same time. At my local museum in South London and the Pilots of the Caribbean work that they've been doing brilliantly at the RAF museum, it's - there's not been a real consistency and it's getting that platform, that media platform. Social media has helped in terms of promoting one's work, but it's a difficult one because unless you get that media attention, people don't know you exist and people don't know that your work exists. That's the most frustrating thing of all. So, I think yes, to answer your question, yes, things have changed in terms of Black Lives Matter and the Windrush Scandal, it's drawing attention. But I just wish people would do their homework instead of making the assumption that nothing's ever been done.

**Joseph:**

One of the things would say is that an increasing amount of work has been building up - your work and the work, as it was pointed out, of David Olusoga. But would you say that there is a lot more to be done? Can more be done?

**Stephen:**

Yes, absolutely. More can be done to have more material and this is absolutely crucial to what I do now for young people, for children in primary schools, for students in academies and secondary schools, there isn't enough. What happened with *Black Poppies* was - I know I'm diverted back to the First World War, but school teachers and parents of young people, particularly primary school children, kept asking, can you adapt it for children? There's nothing for children about this subject! There's a few books about Walter Tull and nothing else. David Olusoga then did a black British book for children based on his adult book and black poppies. The children's version has taken off like a rocket like the 1st edition did in 2014. I went into a school last week to talk about it the kids just would like hanging on every word of it.

So we need more resources. It's all very well for certain people like black celebrities to complain - I'm not gonna name names - to complain that there should be more done in schools, and this certainly is true, of the Second World War as well as the First World War. Because the two world wars are part of the curriculum, but they're not teaching young people about the black contribution. But they never finished a sentence - they never finished the sentence, which really irritates me, which is that publishers need to commission more books - and that's where the problem lies. If the problem lies with publishers, if publishers are not commissioning books about the black contribution to World War 2 for young people then, nothing's gonna really change because young people are still gonna be taught the same stuff they've been taught since year dot. And that really frustrates me.

And if you drill down, and I'm going to be very specific now, who are the publishers? Well I'm probably cutting off my nose to spite my face saying this - publishers are very white and very middle class. You can count on one hand how many black publishers we have in Britain. You can count on one hand how many black literary agents we have in this country. It's a terrible situation, and it's not to say that that white publishers and white literary agents can't encourage more historians of black Britain to deal with this subject. They are commissioning more black novelists and black poets, which is fantastic. But the history is being missed completely and until that changes - and this was the question that kept coming up when I did my Black History Month talks about *Under Fire*, 'Do you think the Black Lives Matter will change anything?' And I said, well, come back and ask me in five



years time - this was in sort of 2020-2021 - I said because, 'the white middle class publishers are not going anywhere'. They're not gonna give up their jobs. We've got to educate them. We've got to enlighten them.

I don't know how to do that personally and it's very difficult and it's very difficult for a historian like myself to get into the world of education. I might get the occasional invite to a school to talk about *Under Fire* or *Black Poppies*, but that's as far as it goes. I don't understand the inner workings of the education system or who influences the curriculum. No one ever asks me. I just do the work and hope and pray that my books.

**Joseph:**

Speaking of your book, *Under Fire*, I just wanted to ask you, going specifically to the heart of, I guess, how one could do more. How did you research this book? What sources did you locate and discover? What was essentially the building blocks that helped you to bring this book together? Could you explain that for our listeners?

**Stephen:**

I get asked this question, Joe, and I panic a bit because it just evolved over, to be honest, 40 odd years. I mean, I'm going back to the 1970s, the early 80s. It was like for me, like a big jigsaw puzzle and you just keep finding more clues, more information. Yes, I did go to the British Library, go to the Imperial War Museum Archives, anywhere I thought I might find more information. One thing led to another - Dr Harold Moody, I mean, the founder of the League of Coloured Peoples, one of the first black-led organisations in this country, campaigning and working diligently all through the war led – the League that is - led by Dr Harold Moody. So, when I was quite young, I discovered that all the newsletters of the League of Coloured peoples were in the British Library. So then I discover the British Library, and then I go there. There was a Nigerian air raid warden in London – in Marylebone - Ekpenyon - who was a law student I think when the war broke out. And then he - he left the law to become an air raid warden. Well, I discovered through a famous World War Two book that I read, Angus Calder *The People's War*, which I looked at in the library and there's a tiny little note in the back of this book, *Some Experiences of an African Air Raid Warden* by Penguin and I was still a teenager. And then I discovered - oh well, I knew this anyway, but I didn't know the detail - Aunt Esther was not the only black person in London during the Second World War. But so I went off to the war - to the British Library - they photocopied it - I still got that original photocopy from 40 odd years ago. So, it's understanding and having the common sense to know that Aunt Esther, Ekpenyon, Dr Harold Moody, they couldn't have been the only ones, and you keep reading up and finding more information.

So the League of Coloured People's newsletters were – were fabulous because they would throw out stories from the war, the Second World War, about different black servicemen and women and their experiences and discrimination, that they were – Ulric Cross receiving the DSO and the DFC - they would report all of this stuff in the newsletter, so was all there. And a friend, a black friend of mine who I was very close to in those years, my friend Sonia, she said to me something I've never forgotten. She said 'our history', meaning our black people's history in this country, is there - it's in the archives. You just have to go in and find it.

So, there was no academic background to my work. I left school very young, at 16, and went to work in the Peckham Dole office, as a civil servant and - but on the side I'm doing this kind of research. But it - there was no structure, there was no as, as you say, methodology - nothing like that. I did do a degree later on, but by then I'd learned how to do it anyway and approach it in my own - with my own methods. It's like, I don't know whether that makes sense, I need to get better at explaining how I did it, but it was just one thing led to another. And having a question in mind and not believing in all the stuff that traditional historians were saying - that the numbers were so tiny that they're insignificant. I'm not going to mention them in my history book about the Second World War. I just found out stuff for myself.

**Joseph:**

So it seemed like a very sort of - organic process - almost the process really of discovery.

**Stephen:**

Absolutely!

**Joseph:**

Yeah, and it's - I think you've mentioned already in this interview that this is something you would describe as, sort of, maybe not a life's work, but it's definitely been a passion of your life or something that something that you care deeply about. I know it's - the answer might seem very obvious, but what made you care so much? What was it that, really - it seems that there was a great deal of passion in this from your side. What was it that made you so passionate about that? Was it, was it the love of your adopted aunt or was this something that - was this something that you felt that needed really strongly to be addressed? Was - what were your reasons?

**Stephen:**

Absence and the invisibility and knowing that wasn't the case, that wasn't the truth, and it - the more I found out and the more of an inquiring mind that I developed, as I grew older, and the more fascinating and important it becomes. So it became - I wasn't like this white lefty or this white liberal who was - trying to do something for black people because they don't know their history. It wasn't like that, it was, as you say, organic. It was to do with family it was to do with - wow, Aunt Esther's got an amazing story and I learned her life story. And the people she met and the experiences she had. But one of the most important things of all - and I got this from Aunt Esther and many, many black people that I've interviewed and befriended since - that it is not to define black people by racism. That wasn't the only thing they experienced. They experienced all sorts of things.

And so it was a joy to discover, when I delved into the Second World War, particularly Armed Services, that there were black men and black and white men, black servicemen and white servicemen and black service women and white service women that were friends - that were comrades and that were fighting for a common cause. They did exist We didn't segregate like the Americans did, thank goodness! Britain wasn't perfect. I mean, we had an empire, we colonised, we exploited people in those in those colonies - in those countries. But when they came together in the

Armed Services, they were together, as those stories that I found really illuminated and empowering - that there was integration.

Of course, it changes after the war but - and also discovering that the motivation for black people from the Caribbean and Africa and so on - wanting to join up. They all had different reasons. I mean, the main reasons were either to get away from the colony, come to the mother - what they called the Mother Country Britain, and support the British war effort. But there was also political reasons. And the political reason for some, not all, but a large number of them was 'if we can prove ourselves to the British Government, to the British people, that we are as good as the white man and the white in the Armed Services by serving the country in the Second World War they will give us independence after the war' - which eventually happened. It took a long time, but that breakdown of the empire and the breaking up of the empire and giving independence to Jamaica and Trinidad and Nigeria and Sierra Leone and so on - that happened. But a lot of black people that joined up believed that would happen quicker if they could prove themselves as well. So, some came because they were British subjects and they were loyal to the King and country and others came for political reasons.

And that's what made it as I grew older and learned all of this - partly by talking to people, partly by reading what little had been - and partly by having an inquiring mind and when I say to people at my black history talks, 'always keep an open mind'. Not all white people were racist, not all black people saw themselves as victims. Racism plays an important part in the history, but it's not the only narrative. And that really empowers people - when I said that to the young people last week in a classroom of students of predominantly young people from African-Caribbean backgrounds, they were listening and taking them on board, and they're important. And so, I think they will hopefully look at the two world wars in a different way. I mean, that's all one can hope for.

**Joseph:**

It does seem as though there is a counter narrative to the whole narrative that black service personnel would - inherently met a wall of racism. It does seem as though, that actually, contrary to popular belief, that actually, in fact, the British people were warm and accepting of black personnel. Certainly, you hear anecdotal stories of black service personnel in the Royal Air Force, possibly in the Army, coming into British pubs and encountering their colleagues in the U.S. armed forces who are put upon by, sort of, Southern Whites in the United States uniform and subjected to very severe segregation rules, and, essentially, the white U.S. personnel being told where to go, essentially, by pub landlords and by various different people who just say, this is not how things operate within British society. This is not how we treat the people - in this particular way.

**Stephen:**

Yeah, I cover that in the book, and that always surprises people as well, that there was this protective feeling amongst some white British people. It's much more complex than that, as we all know. But generally, you know, the, you know, we were we were nearly invaded in 1940 – Operation Sealion - we were nearly invaded by Hitler, and if he hadn't turned his attention to Russia, we would have been invaded. And so we came that close to becoming part of Occupied Europe really. So the British people were really up against it, and so they generally, with some exceptions, generally they welcomed the people from Africa and the Caribbean that came to this country to join the Armed

Services and work in the munitions factories and do other similar war work on the home front. They welcome the African-American GI's and so - they did defend them when they witnessed some of the appalling racism against them - and incidents, you know, violent incidents where some of these Southern soldiers would literally beat up a - a black soldier or an RAF man who was going out with a white woman. I mean, it was just appalling.

So they brought that racism with them and I deal with that in the book as well. But, generally speaking, I think people were just fighting for the same cause and so, there was a feeling of being united. Lot to be learned from that. But we are in a sort of still in a very difficult and challenging time in this country with regards to race - Windrush scandal or Black Lives Matter. You know, the statues controversy and so on and so forth. It's endless and one can understand why we're in that situation. But it's not easy to put the other narrative out there. It's not easy, but I'm not gonna shy away from talking about it if I'm given the chance to be interviewed or to give talks about my books because it's part of the history. And, as I said, my Aunt Esther would never define herself by her race. She was proud to be British. She was proud to have a father that was Guyanese. She never went to Guyana. She never left this country, but she had a sense of pride in both being black and British. But she never allowed her race to define her as a person.

## **OUTRO**