

## A Jamaican airman over Europe during WW2 by Mark Johnston

My great-uncle, Flight Lt. John J Blair, DFC, was born in rural Jamaica in 1919. The youngest of eight children, he was educated in a tiny country school before attending teacher training college in Kingston. When war broke out in Europe and the RAF was forced to battle the Luftwaffe in the skies over England, John Blair decided to join the fight. Descended as he was from former slaves, he told me later that he and many others in the Caribbean feared what might happen to them if the Nazis defeated Britain:

*'While we were fighting we never thought about defending the Empire or anything along those lines. We just knew deep down inside that we were all in this together and that what was taking place around our world had to be stopped. That was a war that had to be fought; there are no two ways about it. Few people think about what would have happened to them in Jamaica if Germany had defeated Britain, but we certainly could have returned to slavery.'*

During his childhood John had known elderly former slaves, so this threat was palpable. By late 1941 Nazi Germany had conquered most of Europe and North Africa, from western France to the gates of Moscow, and from northern Norway to the deserts of Egypt. By 1945, twenty five percent of Nazi Germany's labour force would be made up of slaves taken from across Europe.

The predations of German submarines also threatened not only the British Isles but Jamaica too. Over twenty German and Italian submarines operated in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, where they sank more than 50 merchant ships and oil tankers during the Battle of the Caribbean.

John J Blair was serious, erudite, and quietly brave. Like many of the almost 500 Caribbean aircrew volunteers, he was selected for navigator training in Canada. Others were trained as pilots, with several of the Caribbean men eventually operating Spitfires and Typhoons over Europe. Many became bomber pilots while a large number served as air gunners. Another 4,000 men and women from the region served in Britain as ground crew.

From December 1944 to May 1945, John Blair, this young school teacher from rural Jamaica, flew 33 operational missions over Europe, many to strongly defended targets in Germany. Like his British and Commonwealth comrades, he faced enemy fighters, flak, mechanical failure, mid-air collisions and the weather. But unlike fully one third of his fellow Caribbean aircrew volunteers, he survived the war.

At least one West Indian, Lancaster navigator Cy Grant of Guyana, and one West African, navigator Johnny Smythe of Sierra Leone, were shot down and held captive in German Stalag Luft camps from 1943 until 1945. Smythe had the unusual distinction of *not* being lynched because of his colour. The Germans who came to kill him on landing were so stunned by the sight of a black airman that they just stood and stared at him in slack-jawed silence.

Both men lived to tell the tales of their captivity as they were liberated when the tanks of the Soviet Red Army crashed through the wire of their camps in May 1945. Grant described the female Red Army sub-machine gunners riding the tanks as 'oozing violence from their very pores'. They had come to seek vengeance for the crimes committed by the Nazis in the USSR.

Uncle John won promotions and the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for his courage, and for his devotion to his aircraft and its crew. His medal citation tells of his determination and coolness under fire and mentions an incident in which he continued to navigate the plane towards the target after already having lost one engine. The crew bombed at an altitude 3,000 feet below the rest of the force, a particularly perilous undertaking, with bombs dropped by other aircraft falling from above.

John's Squadron, No. 102 (Ceylon) Squadron, had the dubious honour of coming joint third for the highest casualty rate in Bomber Command; the Squadron lost eight aircraft and the bulk of their crews just during the first 4 weeks of his period with it. After the war John remained with the RAF until 1963 when he returned to Jamaica, now a qualified barrister. During much of his post war service he was a navigator on the famous Comet aircraft.

The Caribbean aircrew volunteers did not simply fade away after the war. They formed part of a leadership cadre that would do great service for their respective nations. Many became active in their country's independence movements and

some, such as Errol Barrow from Barbados, were future prime ministers. Others would become government ministers or ambassadors as did Squadron Leader Ulric Cross of Trinidad, or leading medical doctors like the great Jamaican Olympic gold medallist and RAF Spitfire pilot Arthur Wint.

The men would also raise families, passing their deeply held beliefs in justice, morality and fair play on to their children and grandchildren. Mosquito navigator John Ebanks, also a teacher from Jamaica, summed things up perfectly:

*'I didn't go to fight for King and Country. I went to fight for myself. I went to fight for all the small countries of the world that would otherwise be ruled by bullies.'*

### **About the author**

Mark Johnson is a former military officer. His book, [\*Caribbean Volunteers at War; the forgotten story of the RAF's 'Tuskegee Airmen'\*](#) is published by Pen and Sword