



LEST WE FORGET TIMELINE

A DECADE-BY-DECADE RECORD OF THE RAF AND ITS BLACK VETERANS SINCE 1918



This selective history summarises some major landmarks in RAF history since 1918, covering:

- Relevant developments in British foreign policy in the transformation from empire to commonwealth.
- The recruitment and treatment of Caribbean people (or those with a Caribbean heritage) into the RAF, weaving in details of the rich stories of local black RAF veterans of the West Midlands who feature in this exhibition.
- The history of migration into the UK and the emergence of Black British identity.

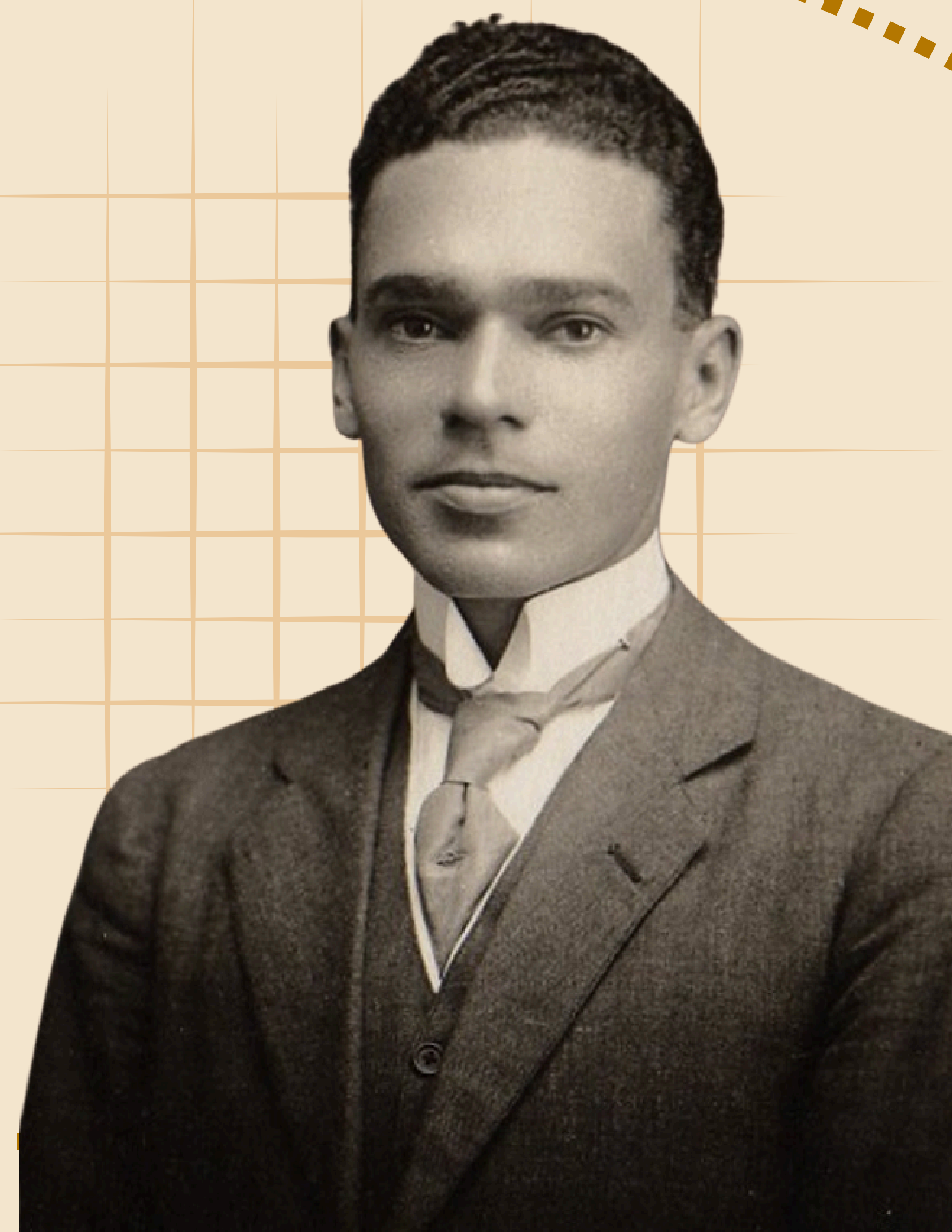
1918 - 1929

The RAF and Black veterans from 1918 to 1929

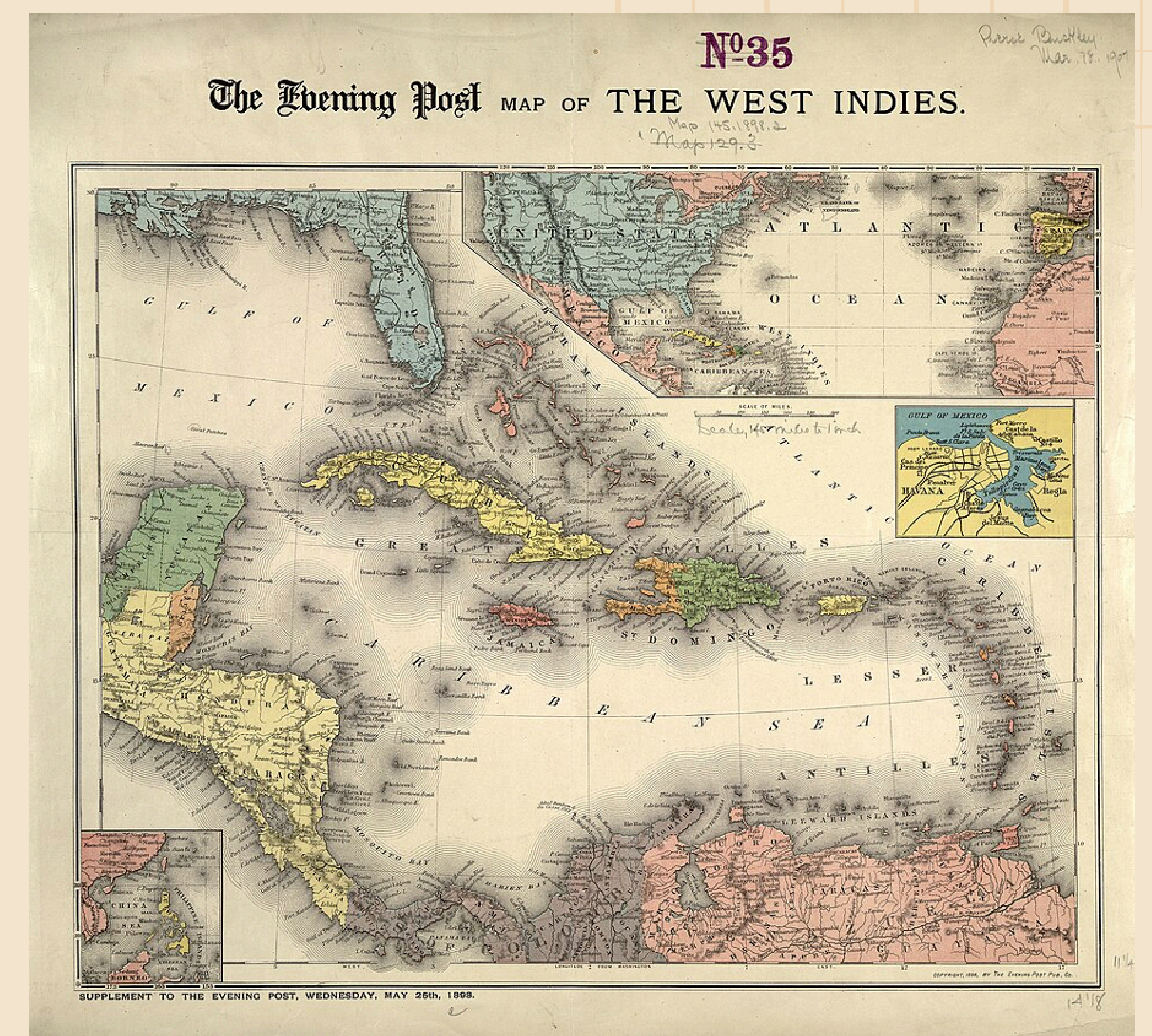
The Royal Air Force was formed on 1st April 1918 in the last year of the First World War by merging the Royal Flying Corps (part of the British Army) and the Royal Naval Air Service (part of the Royal Navy).

Among those who served in the RAF in 1918 were Sergeant William Robinson Clarke from Kingston, Jamaica and Lt William Patterson, Britain's first black pilot who was an officer despite the official ban on non-Europeans serving in that rank at the time.

Although Caribbeans (known as West Indians at the time) were brought up to be loyally British and had proved their ability to fight between 1914-1918 there was a racist ban on recruiting non-Europeans at all from 1923.



Sergeant William Robinson Clarke as he appeared in 1914. He was honourably discharged in 1919 and the RAF paid for his passage back to Jamaica.



Although the above map of the Caribbean (known historically as the West Indies) dates from 1898, it shows the individual islands and territories which were British colonies in the 1920s and 1930s, originally acquired before slavery was outlawed in 1834.

Each island or territory has its own unique identity, a complex mix of African, colonial European and indigenous cultural influences. Poverty and unemployment were very high among the two and half million inhabitants.

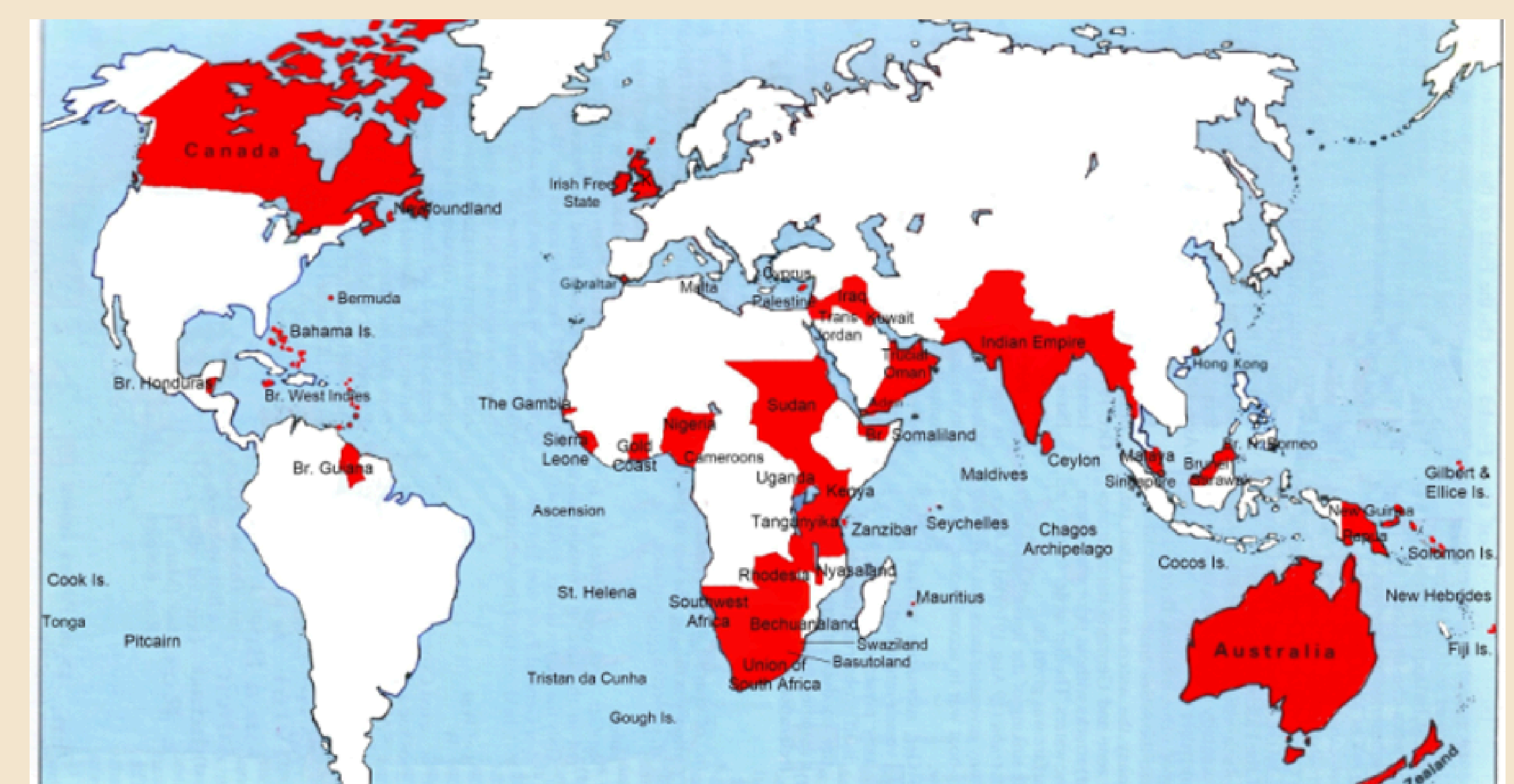
The British Caribbean 1918 - 1939



An RAF Bristol F2b Fighter built in 1918 in which Sergeant William Robinson Clarke was shot in the spine in 1917, flying over the Western Front. [CC BY-SA 2.0](#) (photographed in 2017 by Alan Wilson)



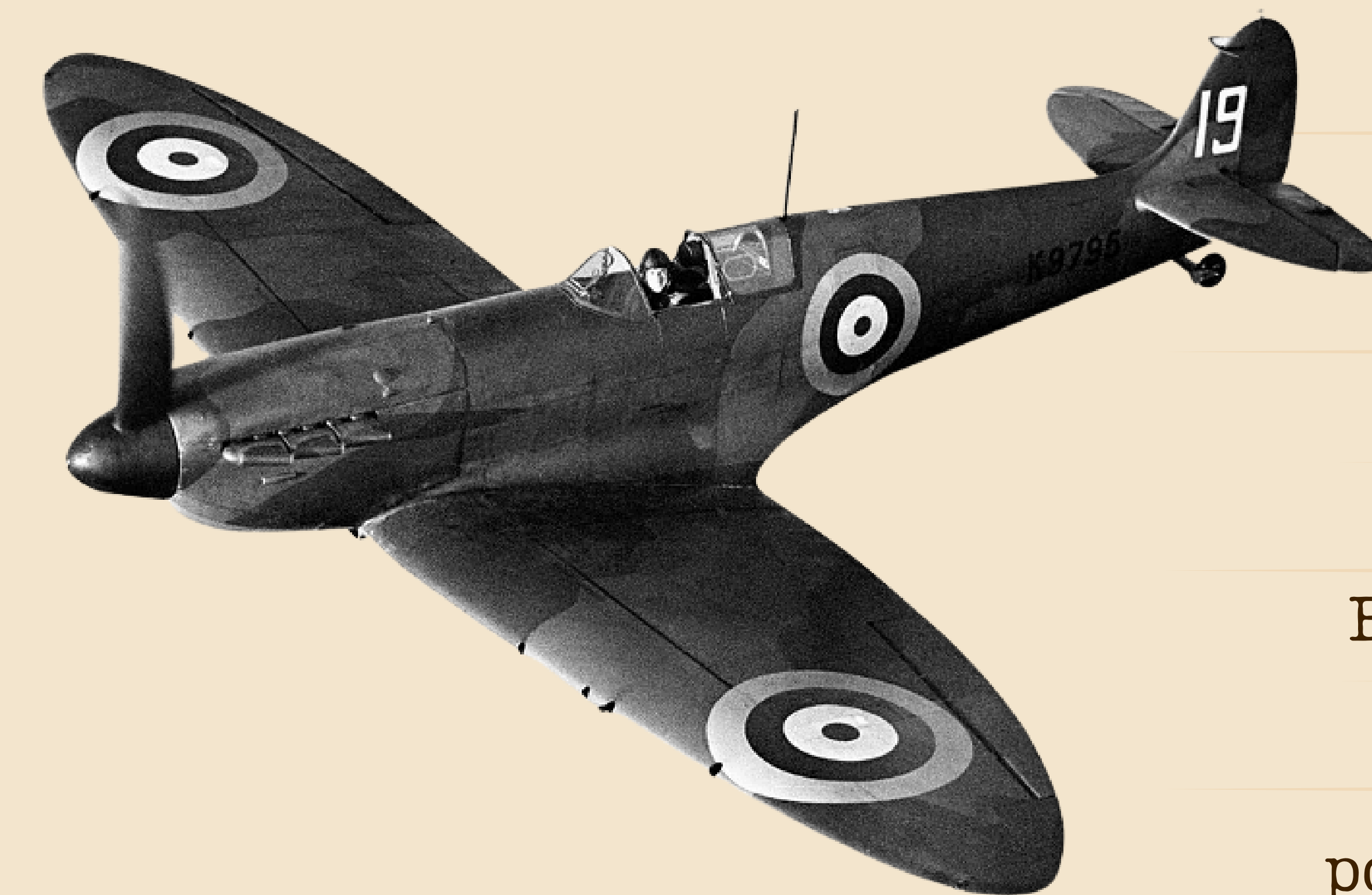
RAF badge (Public Domain)



The British Empire in the 1920s



The College Hall at RAF Cranwell in 2011 where officers were and are trained (by Charles Drake).



A poster for one of the popular RAF displays at Hendon, 1925, published in Flight Magazine, 2 July 1925.

1920's

The British Empire

While the British Empire expanded as a result of the Versailles peace settlements of 1919 which ended the First World War, taking over former German colonies and Turkish territories, the British struggled to maintain their control over it.

Air Power offered a cheap alternative to traditional military campaigns when post-war budgets were tight. The RAF established bases worldwide and self-governing dominions such as Canada set up their own air forces.

1930's

The RAF

British people feared a dreadful new kind of warfare where planes would destroy European cities by dropping bombs and poisoned gas. In 1935 German dictator Adolf Hitler announced his creation of the Luftwaffe, a new German air force.

The British were shocked at its size and began to expand the RAF to meet the new threat. In 1937 radar was introduced which could detect incoming aircraft. Shortly afterwards the famous Hurricane and Spitfire fighters entered service but on the eve of war in 1939 the RAF was about half the size of the Luftwaffe.

To boost numbers it could have recruited from Britain's Caribbean colonies but the racist colour bar of 1923 remained in place. Yet young Caribbeans of the time were eager to escape their impoverished and discontented islands and territories.

1940's

The RAF and Caribbean recruitment



A map of Europe showing territories invaded by German, Italian and Soviet forces between September 1939 and May 1941 (the Soviet Union signed a pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939 to divide much of Eastern Europe between them). Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported.

Manpower shortages drove the gradual lifting of the pre-war colour bar in 1939 and 1940 but serious RAF recruitment in the Caribbean only began in November 1940 after Britain narrowly won the Battle of Britain, just avoiding a German invasion.

Around 6,000 Caribbeans were recruited, the majority serving as ground crew with around 400 as air crew.



This British propaganda poster designed for a British audience gives the impression of imperial unity and solidarity behind the Mother Country in defence of freedom. But closer observers would have noted that soldiers of colour from India and West Africa are in the rear (a Caribbean soldier, sailor or airman is not depicted).

CARIBBEAN RECRUITMENT TO THE RAF

1940's



Training at RAF Hunbanby Moor, Filey, Yorkshire (IWM D 21136).

The motives for young Caribbean people volunteering were mixed; patriotic duty to Britain as the Mother Country, a sense of adventure, an awareness of the threat fascism posed, a wish to exchange the poverty and unemployment of Britain's Caribbean colonies for a secure wage and better economic prospects and a desire to travel beyond the confines of their own islands or territories.

A few Caribbean volunteers such as Cy Grant from British Guiana flew in multi-national bomber crews where 44% of men did not survive the war. Such men were rarely promoted to the position of pilot as it was unfairly assumed that white crew members would not accept their leadership. It was more typical for recruits to undertake basic training at Filey in Yorkshire and serve as ground crew.



In the above image, air gunners Sergeant J.C. Dickinson RCAF and Sergeant Leslie Gilkes, 9 Squadron, 1943 (Courtesy of Audrey Dewjee). Sergeant Dickinson survived the war, but Sergeant Gilkes was shot down and killed on 3rd August 1943.

The Trinidadian has no known grave. This photograph is evidence of the friendships that could be forged between air crew of different backgrounds.



Nineteen year old Jamaican Billy Strachan arrived in Britain to volunteer for the RAF. He had enthusiastically sold all his few possessions to buy a passage to Britain on a banana boat.

Unusually, he rose to be an officer and served as a wireless operator/air gunner on Wellington bombers, surviving thirty operations. The RAF also used Strachan to investigate reported racial discrimination within the air force as the war progressed. He claimed he never experienced racism.

Lilian Bader, a black Briton from Liverpool with a Barbadian father and mother of Irish descent succeeded in joining the WAAF (Women's Auxiliary Air Force), becoming one of the first black women to be recruited to the British Armed Forces. She described herself as 'the only coloured person in this sea of white faces'.



Lilian Bader

RAF AND BRITAIN IN THE 1940'S



Young Trinidadian Ulric Cross joined RAF Bomber Command as a navigator and officer. He completed 80 bombing operations and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) Distinguished Service Order (DSO).

He left the RAF in 1947 as a Squadron Leader and went on to become a judge and diplomat in an independent Trinidad and Tobago. It was unusual for black Caribbean aircrew to be accepted as pilot, partly because it was believed that white crew members might not accept their judgements.

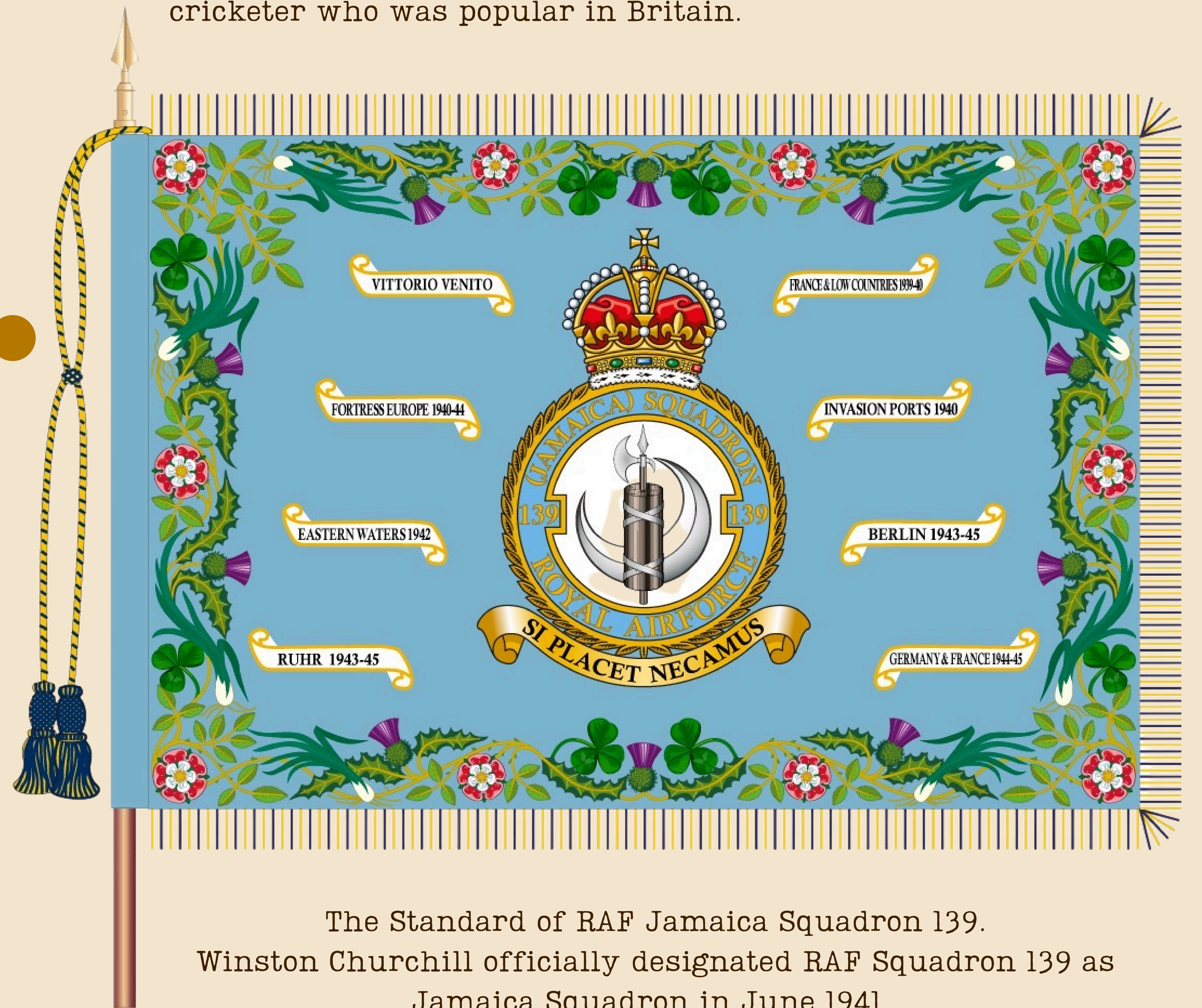
Cross attributed his appointment to his friendship with a famous Caribbean cricketer who was popular in Britain.



West African veteran John Henry Smythe 1943 pictured far right.



Sergeant Lincoln Orville Lynch DFM, a West Indian air gunner serving with No. 102 Squadron, photographed wearing his flying kit by the rear turret of his Halifax at RAF Pocklington, February 1944.



The Standard of RAF Jamaica Squadron 139. Winston Churchill officially designated RAF Squadron 139 as Jamaica Squadron in June 1941.

This was in tribute to the donations from Jamaica towards the cost of 12 Bristol Blenheim bombers made from across the population of the island spearheaded in a campaign by The Daily Gleaner, the local newspaper.

£20,000 was raised in the first ten days of the press campaign alone. Impressive monetary and other donations were made to the British war effort from other Caribbean colonies too.

In August 1944 he was promoted to Flight Sergeant, a rare promotion for a gunner. In September 1944 he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal.

The citation noted his "high standard of determination and devotion to duty", exemplary conduct and declared him "a worthy member of a fine crew" who had "defended his aircraft with great skill on several occasions against enemy fighters".

RAF AND BRITAIN

1940's

King George VI, Queen Elizabeth and the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret inspected this parade of Caribbean airmen in 1946.



Some Caribbean veterans returned to Britain after the war as economic migrants on ships such as the Empire Windrush in 1948, answering the appeal for 1.3 million workers to help rebuild bombed towns and cities.



The wedding photograph of Prince Albert 'Jake' Jacob and Mary Orde on 27th April in Oldbury, 1948. She was told in the street that she should not be with Jake.



The Empire Windrush

However, most returning Caribbeans were not welcome this time—they were the wrong colour. They were barred from hotels, bars and dance halls, denied accommodation and given only the lowliest work.

Local black veteran Prince Albert 'Jake' Jacob of Trinidad served in the RAF between 1944 and 1947.

He married his white, Jewish bride, Mary Orde in Oldbury on 27th April, 1948. They both faced discrimination because of his colour and their mixed marriage.

At the same time, Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union lead Britain to develop its own atomic bomb as a key American ally and founder member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949.

RAF AND BRITAIN

1950's

In the 1950s, the RAF acquired a fleet of V-bombers capable of dropping atomic weapons on the Soviet Union. After the disastrous Suez campaign of 1956, when Britain and France attempted to seize back the Suez Canal from Egypt, Britain only took military action in future with the support or consent of its main American ally. However, the RAF took part in controversial campaigns in Kenya and Malaya to maintain colonial control there.

The RAF continued recruiting from the Caribbean but in far fewer numbers than during the Second World War (the Armed Forces secretly pegged the proportion of recruits of colour at just 2%).

Life for former Caribbean veterans or other colonials of colour settling in Britain remained difficult.

Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill secretly considered running a general election campaign under the slogan 'Keep Britain White!'.

As Caribbean communities grew in the West Midlands and elsewhere, they became targets for white racist attacks.



Sir Winston Churchill as Prime Minister in the 1950s. He asked chief constables to send him reports of any idleness, crime, vice or welfare dependency in growing black communities.

Politicians and officials desperately searched for a way of altering migration laws to restrict the entry of brown and black people from newly independent Commonwealth countries and from the remaining empire, without appearing to be racist.

1960's

In the 1960s most remaining British colonies gained independence, including Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago in 1962. The world also nearly went to nuclear war as Soviet missiles were scheduled for sites in communist Cuba. RAF pilots stood ready to drop nuclear bombs on the Soviet Union.

The Commonwealth Migration Act of 1962 successfully limited the entry of brown and black migrants to the UK from the Commonwealth. Home Secretary R.A.B Butler commented "The great merit of this scheme is that it can be presented as making no distinction on grounds of race or colour"- entry depended on your skills or an offer of work.

Kenneth Straun, who had migrated from St Kitts in the 1960s, boosted his promotion prospects in the RAF by working on aircraft of the prestigious Queen's Flight from the mid-1970s.

Local black RAF veteran Donald Campbell arrived as a boy in Birmingham from Jamaica in 1965 to join his migrant parents, astonished by the bitter cold and snow.

Another local black veteran, Wolverhampton-born Karen Kellar remembers being told by a white child that 'My dad didn't fight (in the world war) for you!'. She decided to prove her worth and British identity through public service in the RAF.



A Vulcan bomber seen from below. The first of the 'V-bomber' s entered service in January 1955. It could carry nuclear payloads. (CC BY-SA 3.0)



Jazz saxophonist Andy Hamilton formed a jazz band in 1953 with Jamaican RAF veteran Ron Daley. (CC BY-SA 2.0) Andy Hamilton and the Blue Notes became famous on the Birmingham music scene.



Kenneth Straun, age 20 At RAF Swinderby, Lincolnshire, first weeks in the RAF, 1964.



Donald Campbell in RAF Gütersloh German, wearing a tunic style uniform in 1973.

1970's

The RAF's international role was diminished as Britain's withdrawal from empire continued. Restrictions on migration reduced Commonwealth migration into Britain further.

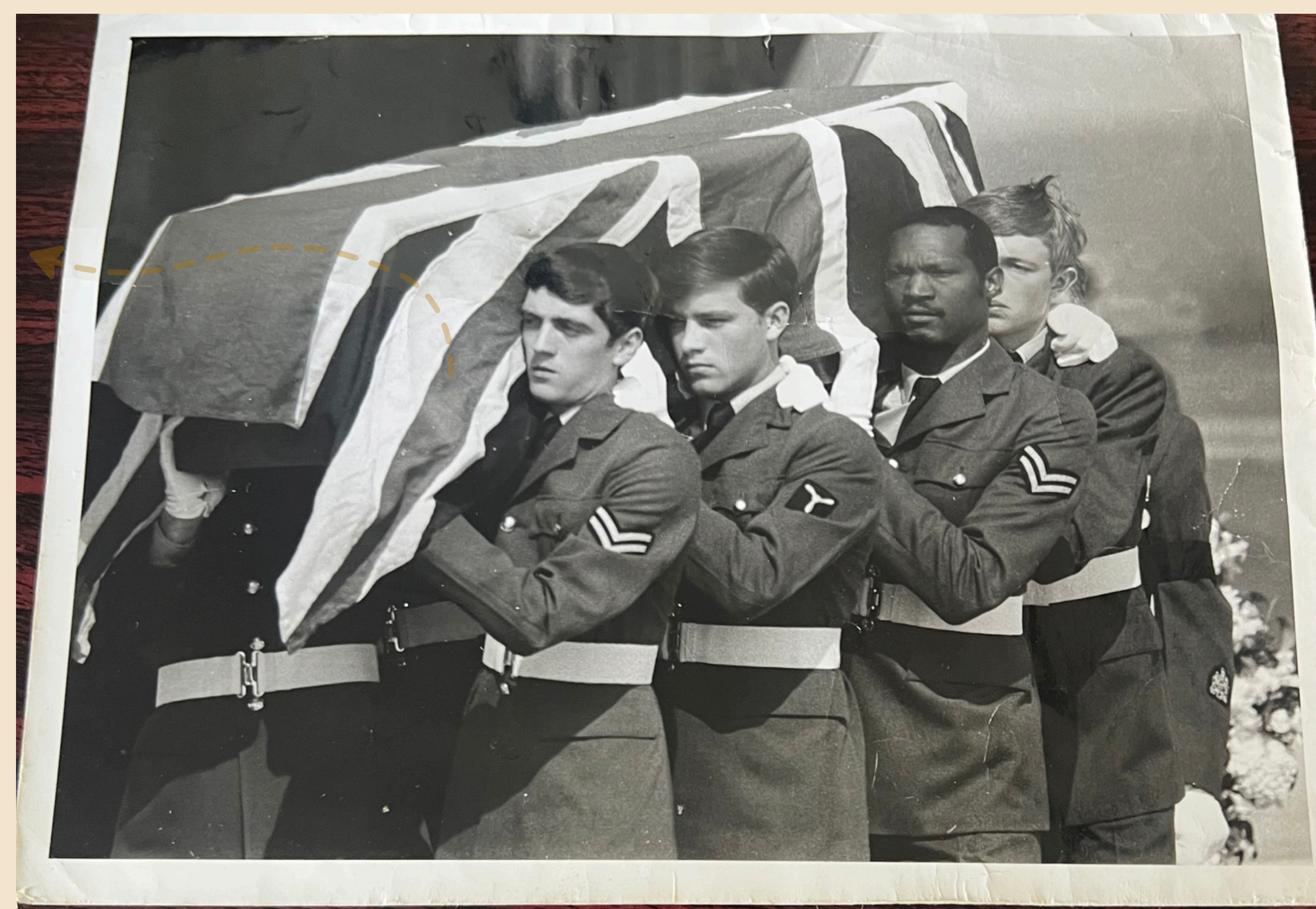
With political and economic instability and a rise in unemployment, the 1970s saw the growth of the far-right National Front which called for the repatriation of migrants of colour.

RAF black veteran Bryan Hughes Scott was denied a place at grammar school because of discrimination. Other local veterans complain of how little was expected of them educationally yet veteran John Winston Clarke from a poor Smethwick household experienced an excellent state education.



Karen Kellar in 1979 receiving silver plate prize RAF Catering competition.

Kenneth Straun, 2nd from right, receiving Earl Mountbatton's body home return after his assassination 1979.



1980's

In 1982 Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government had to fight an unexpected war liberating the Falklands Islands, a remote colony in the South Atlantic from Argentinian occupation.

Local black RAF veteran Karen Kellar cooked for the prime minister as an RAF chef at Chequers, her official country residence. From 1985 the Cold War thawed as Mikhail Gorbachev, the young Soviet leader forged improved relations with US President Ronald Reagan.



Donald Campbell visit to Bardufoss, Northern Norway 1989, with a Photo Reconnaissance Unit Squadron.



Local black RAF veteran John Winston Clarke.

Meanwhile, Thatcher's government also cut public spending, privatised industries and increased unemployment. This disproportionately impacted already disadvantaged black communities in urban areas, blighted by crime, poor housing and bad relations with the police.

In April 1981 a riot or uprising occurred in Brixton, London where police clashed with mostly black youths. Police vehicles were burned and some shops and buildings fired and looted. Similar riots broke out across the country; there were two in Handsworth in 1981 and 1985.



Despite the challenges facing black communities as the 1980s closed, Black British identity grew in confidence and visibility. Black faces featured regularly in entertainment, broadcasting and sport. Four black MPs were elected to Parliament in 1987. One was Dianne Abbott, the daughter of Jamaican parents. The first Black History Month was held in London that year.

It has since become a way of celebrating black history in many schools and communities across the UK, helping to forge a sense of what it means to be both Black and British. Local black RAF veteran John Winston Clarke was well-supported through the ranks to become an officer and always felt protected by his colleagues from racism.

1990's

The RAF took part in the unanticipated Gulf War of 1990–1991 which expelled Iraqi troops from the occupied state of Kuwait. Local black RAF veteran Bryan Hughes Scott saw active service in this war. Even more unexpected though had been the end of the Cold War in 1989, the reunification of Germany in 1990 and the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 which saw a 'peace dividend' where British governments cut defence spending and gradually closed RAF bases in Germany.

In 1993 local black RAF veteran Jeff Nelson was denied an officer training place on grounds of 'skin pigmentation'. He left for a successful career in the police force. In 1996 a scandal broke exposing the continued existence of a colour bar for elite military regiments, ongoing racism in the Army and a culture of fear experienced by black soldiers.

The Ministry of Defence agreed that the Armed Forces, including the RAF would set targets for recruitment of ethnic minorities, increase the number of ethnic minority officers, remove barriers to promotion and promote a non-racist environment. The RAF published data on the ethnicity of its personnel for the first time – 1.2% came from ethnic minorities.



Karen Kellar receiving long service Good Conduct Medal 1991 Uxbridge.



Donald Campbell demonstrating survival equipment used by aircrew on military aircrafts to the Duke of Kent, RAF Wyton, Cambridgeshire, 1980's.

2000's

On 11th September 2001, four airliners, hijacked by Al Queda, an Islamist terrorist group attacked New York's World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in Washington. 2996 people died. A profoundly shocked United States invoked NATO's Article 5 for the first time, calling on Britain and an expanding alliance to participate in its new 'War on Terror'.

The RAF took part in US led campaigns to replace the Taliban government of Afghanistan in 2001 and Saddam Hussein's Iraqi government in 2003.

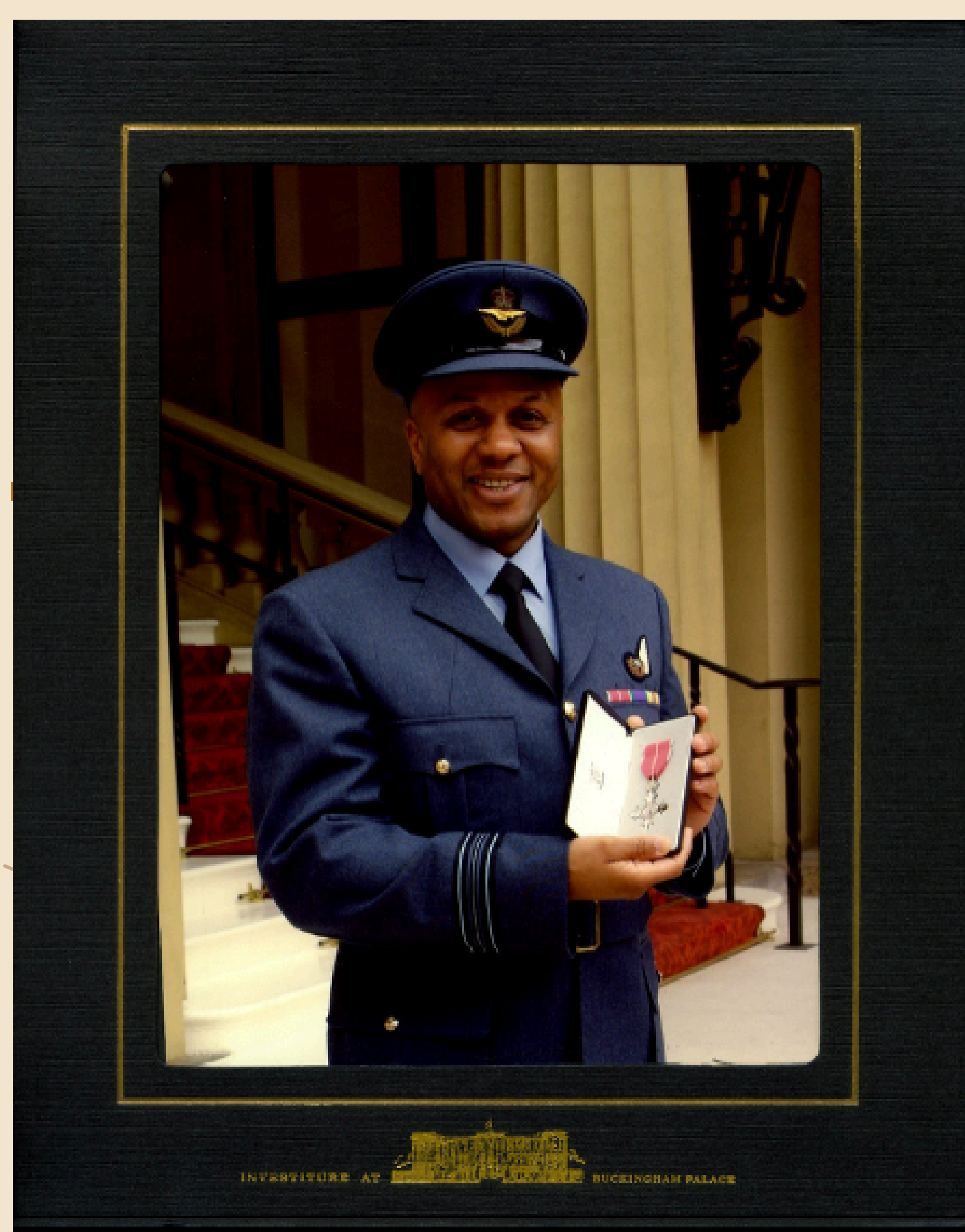
It supported expensive British military operations afterwards occupying parts of Afghanistan and Iraq which resulted in RAF casualties. Local black RAF veteran John Winston Clarke served in both countries with distinction.

By 2006 the RAF had increased its proportion of ethnic minority personnel to 2.2% (0.4% identified as Black Caribbean). Local black RAF veteran Bryan Hughes Scott discovered evidence under Freedom of Information legislation that he had suffered delayed promotion during his career.

Some other local black veterans also experienced this. The 2008 banking crisis had profound economic consequences for the world and the British economy.

2010's

John Winston Clarke awarded The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) – Military Division in the 2005 New Year's Honours List – Investiture at Buckingham Palace held by The Prince of Wales on Friday 26th May 2006.



In 2012 black volunteers played Windrush migrants coming to Britain in 1948 during the spectacular Olympic opening ceremony in London, showing that their arrival was now accepted as a part of British history.

From 2013 the 'hostile environment' directed towards illegal migration, unfairly targeted many Caribbean residents who could not prove their right to remain in the UK from before 1973.

At least 83 people were wrongly deported and some in the Windrush Generation questioned their British identity after decades of residence. Only some of those eligible for compensation ever received any and some had already died.

2020's



Unveiling of plaque for 4000 Caribbean Servicemen at Filey Yorkshire 1st April 2023.

From L-R: WW1 Veterans RAF, Alford Gardner, Gilbert Clarke, Neil Flanagan, Ralph Ottey (he went to Jamaica on the Windrush ship and is still alive aged 101, Prince Albert Jacob and John 'Jack' Crawford. Photo by Mike Seaman (MSI Photography).

The Black Lives Matter movement prompted a revaluation of the legacy of the British Empire and colonialism with controversies about which public monuments in Britain should be retained. School and university curricula were diversified and 'decolonized'.