

The Two Lives of Eugene Bullard

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How the first black combat pilot escaped America, became a hero in France, and ended up an elevator operator in New York.

By Cori Brosnahan



Eugene Bullard (far left) in a group shot circa 1914–1918. Courtesy of the U.S. Air Force.

In his own words, Eugene Bullard was the “first known Negro military pilot.” That, at least, was what was printed on his business cards. By that time, after a quarter-century in France, Bullard was back in the U.S., living in New York City, where he worked variously as a security guard, a perfume vendor, and a Rockefeller Center elevator operator. First *known* Negro military pilot; Bullard was a man both proud and humble, and his business card reflected that. But it also reflected the world in which he lived. His was not a first that had been formally recognized — much less celebrated. The story of how Eugene Bullard

became the first black combat pilot, and why his achievement stayed in the shadows for so long, is a tale of alternate realities, of what happens when opportunity is offered or denied—and, ultimately, seized regardless.

Born in Columbus, Georgia in 1895, Bullard would recall that as a child, he was “as trusting as a chickadee and as friendly.” For a while, his parents were able to insulate him from the realities of racism so that he “loved everybody and thought everybody loved me.” But they could only do so much. When Bullard’s father got into a fight with a racist supervisor, a lynch mob came to the house. Bullard’s father survived, but was forced to go into hiding. Dreaming of a place “where white people treated colored people like human beings,” Bullard decided to run away. Accounts vary, but he was likely only 11 when he left home.

For the next five years, Bullard roamed around Georgia, encountering kindness and cruelty from a wide cast of characters along the way. At one point, he joined a band of English gypsies who opened his eyes to the possibility of a better life for African Americans in Europe. Crossing the Atlantic would become Bullard’s new objective; in 1912, at the age of 16, he stowed away on a ship leaving Norfolk, Virginia for Germany. It dropped him off in Scotland, where people treated him “just like one of their own.” Within 24 hours, he was “born into a new world” and “began to love everyone” once again.

From Scotland, Bullard would make his way to England. He took whatever jobs he could find, including: street performer, dock-worker, target for an amusement park game, helper on a fish wagon, and boxer—the last of which would eventually take him to France. Bullard was instantly smitten, recalling later how “it seemed to me that the French democracy influenced the minds of both white and black Americans there and helped us to act like brothers as near as possible.” France would become so important to Bullard that he would rewrite his own biography to imbue his arrival there with a sense of destiny; in Bullard’s memoir “All Blood Runs Red,” his father has French roots, and it is the dream of France that pulls him away from Georgia in the first place.



Courtesy of the U.S. Air Force.

So it was no surprise when, just 19-years-old, Bullard joined the fabled French Foreign Legion to fight for his adopted country against Germany in the Great War. He was later transferred to a standard French army unit and fought at the Battle of Verdun, where he was seriously injured attempting to carry a message from one French officer to another. The wound would take him out of ground combat permanently; his heroism would earn him the Croix de Guerre military decoration.

It was during his convalescence at a clinic in Lyon that he became acquainted with a French air service officer who promised to help him become an aircraft gunner. The officer made good on his word; in October of 1916, Bullard began training as a gunner at a military air station near Bordeaux. There he learned about the Lafayette Escadrille, a squad of American fighter pilots flying under the French flag. The Escadrille was well-compensated and undeniably glamorous (their mascots were two lion cubs named Whiskey and Soda). Bullard immediately asked to train as a pilot rather than a gunner. He would receive his pilot's license seven months later. Celebrating his achievement

with friends in Paris, he later recalled that, “by midnight every American in Paris knew that an American Negro by the name of Eugene Bullard, born in Georgia, had obtained a military pilot’s license.”

As for Americans back in America, they remained ignorant of Bullard’s achievement. It was not reported in American newspapers or magazines, save a small item in the January 1918 issue of *The Crisis*, a journal produced by the NAACP, which said only that Bullard had “enlisted in the Aviation-Corps.” Bullard’s biographer Craig Lloyd notes that the American military had privately decided not to accept African Americans, and the media silence “may have been a result of censorship, official or self-imposed, by the American press.”

Bullard would soon feel the sting of that rejection directly. After America entered the war in April of 1917, Bullard—who still loved the country he’d left—applied to fly for the American Expeditionary Forces. He was rejected. Still, he derived “some comfort out of knowing that I was able to go on fighting on the same front and in the same cause as other citizens of the U.S.”

He could not have known that his career would soon be cut short entirely. The end of the war was still a year away. Bullard, who had flown some 20 missions, was a competent pilot who had earned the trust and respect of his comrades. So the American was surprised and confused when French military authorities ordered him out of aviation and into a noncombat position in the infantry.

The exact reasons remain murky. According to Bullard, the dismissal could be traced back to Edmund C. Gros, the primary American liaison for the Lafayette Escadrille. Bullard had a tiff with a racist French officer and Gros had used what seemed to Bullard a minor incident to oust him. In their 1972 biography of Bullard, P.J. Carisella and James W. Ryan would reject their subject’s conjecture; instead, they relay a story ostensibly supported by Bullard’s wartime acquaintances, in which Bullard is relieved of his duties after committing a far greater offense—punching a French lieutenant. Craig Lloyd, writing almost three decades later, acknowledges that the evidence against Gros is circumstantial, but believes it ultimately “confirms Bullard’s suspicion.”



Courtesy of the U.S. Air Force.

We may not ever know what happened, but context helps fill in the picture. When Carisella and Ryan discarded the idea that Gros could have been behind Bullard's dismissal, they did so reasoning that it "seems hardly credible that white Americans living in wartime Paris could still practice their age-old prejudices and deprive France of such a badly needed fighter." But it is clear that Jim Crow had arrived in France with the American Expeditionary Force in late 1917 and early 1918. As Lloyd explains, American officers believed that the morale of their white American soldiers would suffer if they "saw black American troops enjoying freedom from segregation and discrimination, and especially the freedom to associate with white women." Measures were taken to disparage black troops; white officers publicly accused them of everything from cowardice to rape.

Perhaps the most blatant and notorious display of American racism in France was the Linard Memo. The confidential document advised French military and civilian authorities that “although a citizen of the United States, the black man is regarded by the white American as an inferior being with whom relations of business or service only are possible.” It went on urging them to “prevent the rise of any pronounced degree of intimacy between French officers and black officers” because “we cannot deal with them on the same plane as with the white American officers without deeply wounding the latter.” Though signed by a Frenchman, it was composed by a French-American committee, and clearly reflects American attitudes; when the memo came to light in France, it was roundly denounced by the government.

For all the U.S. military’s attempts to re-create the American racial paradigm overseas, they couldn’t control everything. African American soldiers returned to America after the war with a wholly different sense of themselves and their place in the world. That newfound consciousness would influence the struggle for equal rights in the decades to come.

Eugene Bullard, whose wounds entitled him to French citizenship, would remain in Paris after the war. There he became a successful nightclub impresario and gym owner. He lived at the starry center of a Parisian post-war society; Josephine Baker babysat for him; Langston Hughes washed dishes at his cabaret; Ernest Hemingway based a character on him.

Bullard’s life in France came to an end with World War II. Volunteering once again to fight for France, he was wounded. Forced to flee to neutral Spain, Bullard would escape embattled Europe for America aboard a steamship, crossing the Atlantic for the second time, in the opposite direction, almost three decades after his original voyage. He would live out the rest of his days in New York, where he enthusiastically took part in the French cultural life of the city. Two years before his death in 1961, the French made him a Knight of the Legion of Honor; thirty-three years after his death, the United States Air Force appointed him a second lieutenant.



In 1959, Bullard appeared in his elevator operator's uniform on the Today Show. Courtesy of the U.S. Air Force.

America was and is a country to which people from all over the world come for the opportunity to realize their full potential. But Eugene Bullard and countless other African Americans had to leave it to realize theirs, and many who stayed never had the chance. In that, Bullard's story is a testament to what prejudice has cost all Americans. "Bullard's two lives," writes Lloyd in his epilogue, "the one in America and the other in France, illustrate the colossal spiritual, social, and economic waste to this nation caused by the tenacious denial to black people of their inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

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