

## **BLACK SWALLOW OF DEATH**

by

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1340 words

Eugene (Gene) Jacques Bullard, first black fighter pilot, never flew for his country, America; instead, he flew for France in the Great War. Receiving many wounds and medals along the way, he finally returned to the land of his birth, there to live out his remaining years in relative obscurity – from the U.S. authorities anyway.

Born October 9 1894 in Columbus, Georgia, he was the seventh of ten children. His father came from Martinique; his mother Josephine, was a full-blooded Creek Indian. Although a former slave 'Black Ox' Bullard was an educated man and it was through his influence and tales told at bedtime that Gene determined his direction in life.

But he was compelled to leave home after the traumatic sight of the near-lynching of his father over an unfair charge. He was only eight and his future was set by a memory of his father's words: "Gene, in France a man is accepted as a man regardless of the colour of his skin."

Wandering through the south-eastern United States, mostly at night to avoid hostile white people, he learnt many skills to survive. With Gypsies for a year, he handled racing horses, becoming a successful jockey and winning many unofficial races. Working his way east, doing odd jobs to survive, it took him four years to reach Norfolk, Virginia. Here he managed to stow away on a German ship bound for Aberdeen.

Moving to Glasgow he earned pennies as a 'whistler' (lookout) for gamblers, before making his way to Liverpool. He became a longshoreman, worked on a fish wagon, an 'Aunt Sally' at an amusement park, dodging the balls thrown at him. The agility gained encouraged him to work out at the local gym.

Chris Baldwin's Gymnasium became his saviour, doing odd jobs and being pleasant to everybody, good and bad. Soon a few boxers saw his willingness to be coached and he caught the eye of a local manager, who set him up as a bantamweight. Within a year he had built his body up to qualify as lightweight. He was 16.

After a successful bout against Billy Welsh he became the protegee of the renowned Dixie Kid. He quickly moved up the poster bills, winning fights in England – and France - as a welterweight. Boxing in Paris on November 28 1913, he knew then this was the place to be and after his return to England he joined a travelling act called 'Freedman's Pickaninnies'. They sang and danced, made the audience laugh at their jokes and slapstick comedy. He signed on because one of their scheduled stops would be at the Bal Tabarin, Paris.

After a season touring Europe's capitals they reached Paris and when they left Eugene was not with them. He settled in the city and returned to boxing. Learning French and German, he was useful, translating for fellow boxers. He soon had money, the protection of French democracy and a growing conviction that God had indeed made all men equal. It was August 1914...

Before that year was out France had sustained casualties of half a million, some of them Eugene's comrades but he was too young to fight for his adopted country. On his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday he joined the French Foreign Legion, along with many other American expatriates. After five weeks training he was assigned to the Moroccan Division, which he later said contained 54 nationalities. Eugene and his comrades were sent to the Somme, where 300,000 Frenchmen were dead before Christmas. Bullard and his company did most of their fighting up close and personal – with bayonets.

He participated in heavy fighting through the next two years – Artois Ridge, Mont-Saint-Eloi, Souchez and Hill 119. Because of German atrocities orders were that no prisoners be taken. Eugene's Third Marching Regiment was so heavily reduced that it was dissolved, his company

losing 80% of its strength. Even the traditional pre-battle drink of Tafia, a fighting spirit designed to "...make you want to fight, sing, dance or anything..." couldn't blank out the terrible losses.

After the Battle of Champagne losses were so severe that his regiment was disbanded and he was sent to the 170<sup>th</sup> Infantry, the 'Swallows of Death'. Already wounded several times the hell that was to be Verdun topped anything he had seen before: "I thought I had seen fighting in other battles but no one has ever seen anything like Verdun – not ever before or ever since."

The Germans codenamed Verdun 'Operation Execution Place'. In 10 months a quarter million French were dead, 100,000 missing and three times that number gassed or wounded. On March 5<sup>th</sup> Bullard sustained wounds that invalidated him out of the infantry, being awarded the Croix de Guerre and Medaille Militaire. Convalescing in Lyons he was invited to join the French Flying Service and an American friend bet him \$2,000 he couldn't make it as a pilot. He graduated from flying school in Tours May 17, 1917, the first black fighter pilot in history.

He was assigned to the famous Lafayette Escadrille, flying Spads. He was to say of that period: "I was treated with respect and friendship – even by those from America. Then I knew at last that there are good and bad white men just as there are good and bad black men." Over the city of Metz Sept 8 he claimed two 'kills', one Fokker unconfirmed, falling behind enemy lines. His mechanics counted 78 bullet holes in his aircraft! Next time there was no doubt; the German Pfalz went into a classic Immelmann turn but Bullard ducked into a cloud bank, emerging below and to the right of his foe, shooting him out of the sky with a sustained burst.

When the United States entered the war he tried to transfer. After passing the medical and watching several expatriate Americans transfer, his application was never even acknowledged. A dark period for him; he was transferred back to his old infantry unit, where he performed non-combat duties till the end of the war. He was almost courtmartialled for punching an officer who kicked him off a truck, Bullard knocking him into a ditch. Only his war record saved him.

Discharged as a war hero in 1919 he married a daughter of a French countess, fathering a boy and two girls. His marriage failed after the boy died and they separated. Through the '20s and '30s he ran a nightclub, *Le Grand Duc*, promoting the burgeoning jazz scene, entertaining the likes of Josephine Baker, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gloria Swanson and the Prince of Wales.

It was 1939 and France once again threatened by Germany. Bullard joined the resistance movement. He became a spy, the Nazis frequenting his club arrogantly believing that no Negro could learn German! Under suspicion he fled to Orleans with his two daughters, where he joined the troops in defending the city. In one attack most of his comrades were killed and he suffered a bad spinal wound. His espionage partner, Kitty, bound his wounds and smuggled him to Spain with his daughters. From there he was medically evacuated to the USA.

He got a job with Louis Armstrong, then as an elevator operator at the Rockefeller Center, a position he was to hold for the rest of his working life. America never recognised his worth in two wars but France never forgot. In 1954 he lit the Eternal Flame at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in the Arc de Triomphe, Paris. In 1969 he was named Knight of the Legion of Honor in New York, interviewed on TV but still the U.S. Government remained silent. Charles de Gaulle publicly embraced him as a true French hero in 1960.

On October 12 1961, after a long illness due to wounds received, Eugene Jacques Bullard passed away. Again France was there, draping his coffin with the tri-colour and full honours at Flushing Cemetery, New York.

On August 23, 1994 and 77 years after his flight physical the USAF posthumously commissioned him a Lieutenant.