

AFEHRI File 19-10

Research Materials/Source Documents  
ENLISTED FIRSTS

FILE TITLE: Corporal Eugene Bullard  
- First African-American Fighter Pilot

Reviewed by:

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Abbreviated Biography  
of  
Corporal Eugene Bullard

Eugene Jacques Bullard was born in October, 1894, in Columbus, Georgia, to William Bullard, a black from Martinique, and Josephine Thomas, a Creek Indian. His family was large, consisting of seven brothers and three sisters.

By the age of eight, he had witnessed his uncle's lynching and his father's near-lynching by racist mobs. The latter incident brought to Eugene's mind the words his father had spoken earlier to him: in France a man is accepted as a man regardless of the color of his skin. Eugene, divided between family loyalties and a quest for freedom, left home in search for France.

Because of his illiteracy, he wandered throughout the southeastern United States, mostly at night to avoid hostile whites, searching for France. After two years of wandering and working at odd jobs to stay alive, he stowed away on a freighter steaming out of New York. At the age of ten, with two adventurous years behind him, he arrived in Scotland, a step closer to his goal.

For the next several years, Eugene earned a living as a street whistler and errand boy, eventually settling in Liverpool, England, as a protege of the reknowned boxer the Dixie Kid. Eugene quickly developed as an aspiring fighter, winning bouts in England and France as a welterweight.

But France was his love and he settled in Paris. At the outbreak of World War I, he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion and was assigned to the 170th French Infantry, a regiment of Americans, known as the Swallows of Death. Eugene, due to his ethnic background, became known as the Black Swallow of Death.

As much a warrior as an adventurer and boxer, Eugene participated in some of the most heavily contested battles of 1915-1916. He was severely wounded in one such battle and received the Croix de Guerre for his heroism. While convalescing, he was afforded the opportunity to volunteer for pilot duty in the French Air Service. He completed training on 17 May 1917 and in doing so, secured a place in history as the world's first black pilot and fighter pilot.

Assigned to Spad Squadron 93 and later to 85, Corporal Bullard downed two German aircraft, but the kills were unconfirmed by allied or enemy witnesses. His career as a pilot was suddenly ended in 1918 through a deplorable incident: when American pilots, who were flying for France and Britain, were reorganized under the Lafayette Escadrille and commissioned into the U.S. Army, Bullard was denied entry. It had been decided by a key American official it would be unfitting for white soldiers to salute--and be subordinate to--a black officer. Thus, Corporal Bullard was removed from flying status and returned to regular duty.

In October 1919, Eugene Bullard was discharged from the armed forces of France, a national hero of significant standing. He decided to remain in Paris and soon married a countess and fathered two daughters. He later opened a night club which was to become one of Paris' most famous entertainment spots for singers and musicians of the time.

Then, as war once again threatened the nation, Eugene once more answered the call to duty. In July 1939, he joined the French underground and resistance movement, working on occasion with the famed French spy Cleopatra Terrier. When the Nazi invaded, he was severely wounded at Orleans, but rather than allow him to be captured and interrogated by the Gestapo, French partisans smuggled him to Spain where he was medically evacuated to the United States.

Fully recovered in New York City and joined by his daughters, Eugene settled down to rebuild his life. Perhaps through disinterest or uncaring, America never recognized or realized the legacy of Corporal Bullard. But France never forgot.

In 1954, the French government requested his presence at the Eternal Flame of the Tomb of the Unknown French Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Eugene, along with two white French men, was presented the honor of relighting the flame. Yet, when he returned to America, it failed to recognize him as the hero he was.

In 1959, Corporal Eugene Bullard became a knight of the Legion of Honor in a lavish ceremony in New York City. Yet America did nothing to acknowledge this honor or his place in history.

In 1960, President-General de Gaulle, while visiting New York City, publically and internationally embraced Eugene Bullard as a true French hero. And still America did not respond.

On 12 October 1961, after suffering a long illness due to the wounds he received, Eugene Bullard passed away. But France did not forget. On 17 October, with the tri-color of France draping his coffin, he was laid to rest with full honors by the Federation of French War Officers at Flushing Cemetery in New York.

To this day, Corporal Eugene Bullard has not been acknowledged in American aviation history. Even the Smithsonian Institute, until recently inquired by the USAF Enlisted Heritage Hall, knew little and did less to recognize this aerial pioneer.

As with all great heroes, their time for recognition arrives. Eugene Bullard's time has arrived and is being vanguarded by the USAF Enlisted Heritage Hall. Plans are nearing finalization for the construction of a life-size bronze statue of Corporal Bullard. An unveiling ceremony of the statue is being coordinated with national media sources involving Eugene's daughter and her son--his grandson--a master sergeant in the U.S. Air Force.

A wax artist's proof of the actual cast may be seen in the attached color photograph.

In order to realize the goal of placing Corporal Eugene Bullard in his rightful place in American aviation history, Heritage Hall is soliciting a \$25,000 contribution for the casting of this statue. When completed, it will be exhibited in the hall alongside the actual pilot's license Corporal Bullard flew with when he met the enemy in World War I.

Biographical Notes on

EUGENE JACQUES BULLARD  
Chevalier, Legion of Honor; and 14  
other war medals. Georgia Negro.  
First Negro Military Air Pilot

111  
Bullard  
Eugene J.

**BORN:** Oct. 9, 1894, Columbus, Georgia. **DIED:** Oct. 12, 1961, New York City.

**FATHER:** William G. Bullard, Negro, from Martinique. *grandson of Negro man*

**MOTHER:** Josephine Thomas, Creek Indian, illiterate.

**SIBLINGS:** 3 sisters, 7 brothers.

**CHILDREN:** (Half French): Mrs. Jacqueline Jeanette Bullard Hernandez; Mrs. Lolita Josephine Bullard Robinsen, both of New York City.  
**GRANDCHILDREN:** Denise Robins; Richard Reid.

**EARLY LIFE:** When Eugene was 6, Mother died; when 8, Father threatened by lynch mob for defending self against brutal white. Father's boss spirited him to another city, gave him job there.

Eugene, age 8, ran away to go to France which his father often said treated Negroes same as whites. Boy wandered by night trying to find whatever ocean it was across which France lay. U.S. wanderings and adventures for 2 years.

**8 - 10 YEARS OLD:** Joined Gypsies and cared for their horses. Worked in rich man's racing stable and served as jockey. Other adventures.

Stow-away on freighter for Scotland. Caught 2 days out.

**10 YEARS OLD:** Left freighter at Aberdeen, Scotland. Earned living as street whistler, errand boy, etc. People kind. Adventures.

**IN TEENS:** Protégé of Dixie Kid who taught him to fight. At 17, prize fighter in Liverpool. Fought in England and France and North Africa. Welterweight. *Boy's name: Maddoux*

**WORLD WAR I:** On outbreak enlisted in Foreign Legion. Transferred to 170th Infantry. \* Wounded twice at Verdun. Back to service. Wounded twice more. Hospitalized. Declared disabled. \*(170th French Infantry - regiment of Americans.)

Re-enlisted in French Air Force. First Negro to be a Military Pilot. (In Scout and Combat service.) Many air battles

**BETWEEN WARS:** Drummer, then bandleader, in famous Zelli's Paris nightclub (Montmartre). Left Zelli's.

Married girl of titled French family. 2 daughters and son born. Son dies. Owner own Montmartre nightclub, frequented by celebrities. \*

Owner and trainer, own gymnasium, for boxers & private persons  
\* (Le Grand Duc, 52 rue Pigalle. Later sold it and bought L'Escadrille, 5 rue Fontaine.)

*Handwritten notes at bottom right*

11  
Bullard,  
Eugene J.

**WORLD WAR II.:** Member French underground working with famous woman spy, Cleopatra Terrier.

Fought in French Army at Orleans. Wounded severely in back. Americans, including Consul at Biarritz, helped smuggle him across border as Germans were seizing France.

**ESCAPE THROUGH SPAIN AND PORTUGAL;** Despite wound made way to Lisbon and back to U.S.A.

1940 - 1943 **NEW YORK CITY:** On landing, hospitalized for wound. Penniless as Germans seized Paris nightclub and gymnasium. Voluntary speaker for Free France in U. S. churches, clubs, etc. Worked on docks.

1943 - 1947 **NEW YORK CITY:** Earned living selling French perfumes, etc.

1947 - 54: Back and forth between France and U.S. trying to get back Paris nightclub and gymnasium.

After much litigation, small compensation granted, 1954.

1954 **PARIS:** Chosen to re-light "Everlasting Flame" at Tomb of Unknown Soldier under Arc de Triomphe.

1957 - 1959: Elevator operator RCA building until wounds necessitated less standing. Became salesman. Settled for rest of life, 80 E. 116 St., New York 29, N.Y.

OCT. 9, 1959: Awarded Legion of Honor by French Consulate General in New York City on his birthday.

1959 - Oct. 1961: Sold perfume and wrote rough draft of his autobiography, "All Blood Runs Red." Throughout 1961 suffered pain  
1961 Aug 18, hospitalized, Metropolitan Hospital

OCT. 12, 1961 - Died in Metropolitan Hospital, New York City. War Veterans Oct 16, 1961-8 P.M. Universal Funeral Chapel, Honorary services by Bd of French OCT. 17, 1961 - Funeral - ~~with honors~~ mass, 10 A.M. ST Vincent de Paul Church

Buried with honors, by Federation of French War Officers in Flushing Cemetery

Bullard  
Eugene J.

DECORATIONS AND HONORS OF EUGENE JACQUES BULLARD

late of 80 East 116 Street, New York 28, N.Y.

- ✓ 1. Chevalier of the Legion of Honor (A then CMH)  
(Awarded October 9, 1959, at Consulate General of France, New York City)
- ✓ 2. Medaille Militaire
- ✓ 3. Croix de Guerre (Rope)
- ✓ 4. Medaille de Verdun (Medaille de Verdun) (Silver Star)
- ✓ 5. Croix de la France Libre
6. Medaille de la Somme
7. Cross of Lafayette Flying Corps
8. Croix des Combattants
- ✓ 9. Engager Volontaire, World War I
- ✓ 10. Engager Volontaire, World War II
- ✓ 11. Medaille Interalliee
12. L'Etoile Rouge (Red Star - Wound)
13. Volunteer Service, Free French
14. Medaille de la Victoire
15. 1954, Chosen to light "Everlasting Flame" at Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, under Arc de Triomphe, Paris
16. 1961- October, Diplome d'Honneur of the Association Nationale des Croix des Guerres Paris, framed and framed Manuscript letter from General H. Martin, President General de Croix de Guerre of France wishing him speedy recovery in his ~~last~~ illness and praising his courageous services to France. These were delivered to Mr Bullard at the Metropolitan Hospital by Mr. Georges Tittel, President of the Croix de Guerre in America

73-21  
Hernandez,  
Jacque

Mil Bullard, Eugene Jacques

## SIGNIFICA SEPTEMBER 26, 1982

by Irving Wallace, David Wallechinsky and Amy Wallace

### The Black Swallow

One of the greatest American flying aces of World War I never flew for the United States. All of his medals and military decorations were bestowed by the French.

Eugene Jacques Bullard, the world's first black combat pilot, was born in 1894 in Columbus, Ga., the grandson of a slave. His childhood dream was to live in France, because he'd been told that bigotry was unknown there. So Bullard sailed to Europe as a stowaway, and in 1914 he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion, where he earned the nickname "Black Swallow of Death." After recovering from serious wounds received at Verdun, Bullard got himself transferred to the French Flying Corps.

When the United States entered the war in 1917, it was announced that all American pilots then serving France would be accepted in our air corps and commissioned as officers. Bullard was among the applicants, but his application was ignored. The U.S., in

fact, did not commission a black man as a flying officer until 1943.

Bullard remained in the French Flying Corps. In one dogfight, his plane was riddled with bullet holes,

forcing him to land in enemy territory. Ten days and 18 patrols later, the hero who had been awarded the Croix de Guerre was startled to find himself permanently grounded — on charges of insubordination. Bigotry, he discovered, was *not* unknown in France. He served the rest of the war in the French infantry.

After the Armistice, Bullard worked in Paris as a bandleader, then married a French countess and ran his own nightclubs and an athletic club. During World War II, he joined the French underground. After being wounded at Le Blanc, he

returned to the U.S. and worked at a succession of menial jobs. He lived his last years in a cluttered Harlem apartment, where he died in 1961. He was buried in the French War Veterans cemetery in Flushing, N.Y.



Flying ace Eugene Bullard in 1917

# Enlisted History:

**By John Gatski**  
**Associate Editor**  
**SERGEANTS Magazine**

**(Editor's Note:** In celebration of black airmen's accomplishments and Black History Month in February, this article was written in conjunction with the Airmen Memorial Museum's ongoing research and effort to pay tribute to all enlisted airmen and their families. The editors thank CMSgt. Wayne L. Fisk of Heritage Hall at Gunter AFS, Ala., for his assistance.

It is ironic that the world's first black pilot was from America, but did his flying for France during World War I.

Nonetheless, Eugene J. Bullard was a much-decorated combat pilot who cleared the way for black pilots who joined the military later in World War II and other American wars.

Bullard, the son of a black father and a Creek Indian mother, enlisted in the French Foreign Legion during the early years of World War I, earning the nickname "The Black Swallow of Death."

Later in the war, he became a pilot in the French Flying Corps where he flew combat and scout missions.

Although he tried to get into the American Flying Corps when the U.S. entered the war in 1917, his application was ignored because of his race, according to historians. At that time, blacks were not given the opportunity to achieve pilot status.

His service in the war, however, earned him 15 decorations and honors including the Cross of Lafayette Flying Corps, Chevalier of the Legion of Honor (French Legion of Honor) and the Croix de Guerre.

Despite his successes, Bullard also lived a turbulent life. Born in 1894, he was one of 11 children. His mother died when he was five and he was forced to run away from his Columbus, Ga., home three years later when his father was almost lynched in a dispute with a co-worker.

At age 10, young Bullard stowed away aboard a ship to Scotland from Norfolk, Va. Upon arriving there, he worked odd jobs including a human target for ball tossers at a carnival.

He later took up boxing and was quite good, eventually going to London as a protege of a professional prize fighter. Bullard had always dreamed of going to France to escape the harsh prejudice he experienced as a child and he got his chance via the boxing ring.

He returned to London and also fought in North Africa for a time, but longed to return to France. He did return, but had difficulty getting fights. To make a living, Bullard joined a comedy troupe—one of the varied occupations he undertook just to survive.

While in France, World War I began and Bullard

volunteered for the Foreign Legion's 170th Infantry after hearing of friends who died in the early battles of what would be known later as the "War to End All Wars."

In the 170th, which was made up of Americans, his status as the "Black Swallow of Death" was well deserved—fighting in some of the most intense battles including Verdun and Artios. He was wounded four times in ground battles.

A leg wound left Bullard hospitalized and he faced the prospect of a permanent limp. But his fierce determination helped him to rehabilitate the leg and he eventually walked again without a cane.

With his infantry career over, he decided to become a pilot much to the amazement of friends who wondered how he could be so bold.

Bullard persisted and some influential friends helped him eventually get a transfer to the French Flying Corps. He eventually attained the rank of Corporal.

For a time, it seemed Bullard had eluded the bigotry of his childhood—especially while learning to fly. In the air, he experienced a sense of freedom he had not felt before as he cruised unrestrained among the clouds.

But prejudice eventually caught up with Bullard in France, too. Although he obtained his pilot's license by May 1917 and was certified combat-ready, Bullard was passed over for several months.

With the help of friends, however, Bullard eventually was assigned to the Escadrille Spad 93 squadron along with other U.S. pilots.

He was involved in many air battles while in the 93rd and 85th Spad squadrons and was once shot down over enemy lines. Bullard was credited with downing one enemy aircraft.

Later in 1917, the U.S. began accepting Americans who had been fighting for France into its flying corps, known as the Lafayette Escadrille, and promised to advance their ranks.

Bullard enthusiastically applied. He dreamed of the glory as an American fighter pilot and officer, but once again his application was ignored.

Unable to get into the American flying corps, he continued to fly for France until Nov. 11, 1917 when an incident involving a dispute with an American officer led to his exit from the flying corps. He served out the rest of the war back in the Foreign Legion.

After the war, Bullard's story was not quite as heroic and he continued to live a life that had its ups and downs.

Until World War II, he was a drummer and then a band leader at Zelli's, a ritzy Paris nightclub. He also married a French woman and they had three children, but his only son later died. In the 1920s and '30s, he owned a gym and trained boxers.



The world's first black combat pilot, Eugene Bullard, first enlisted in the French Foreign Legion during World War I.



Eugene Bullard with his French-made Spad airplane in World War I after he was accepted into the Escadriile Spad 93.

SERGEANTS, January/February 1988

At the beginning of World War II, he helped the Allied effort against the Axis Powers through the French underground resistance movement. He also fought briefly with the French Army, but was severely wounded fighting the Germans, who eventually seized his nightclub and other properties he had accumulated since the First World War.

Bullard ended up back in the U.S. where he continued to speak publically for the French resistance until World War II was over.

From the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, he held a variety of jobs including perfume salesman, an interpreter for jazz great Louis Armstrong, an Army base guard and an elevator

operator.

In 1954, the former World War I pilot was honored by the French government when chosen to re-light the "Ever-lasting Flame" at the French Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In 1959 he was awarded the French Legion of Honor.

Bullard died Oct. 12, 1961 and was buried with honors by the Federation of French War Officers in the French War Veterans Cemetery in Flushing, New York.

Despite obstacles Bullard faced, he is today considered a pioneer for having the determination and talent to become the world's first black war-time pilot.

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