

THE INCREDIBLE LIFE OF MONSIEUR BULLARD



Dashing pilot, Eugene Bullard poses beside his Nieuport plane with monkey mascot, Jimmy, who accompanied him on every flight. Bullard was first Negro to join Lafayette Escadrille, French volunteer flight squadron affiliated with American military. Picture was taken in 1918 near Verdun.



Dusty Legionnaires (above) stop to rest from long march during the first months of World War I. As a machine gunner, Corporal Bullard (r.) fought with an infantry unit who called themselves the "Swallows of Death" because of their wild bayonet charges against the enemy. Bullard suffered leg wound in front line trenches with Legion. After recuperating, he joined the air force.

On or off the battlefield, nothing but death could stop this red-hot swinger

BY MARY H. SMITH

THE YEAR was 1916. Over Verdun, the rose in a cloud of gray as the smoke from thousand guns drifted to the sky. Three hundred feet above the battle, four German Fokkers edged near a lone Allied fighter plane which had strayed too far behind the German lines. Spitting bullets, *les Boches* zeroed in on the pilot to chalk up another eminent victory for the Kaiser. Little did they know that they were attacking a man who called himself "black swallow of death."

Their target was a sitting duck, a rickety French *cage a poules* ("chicken coop"); the cockpit sat a greenhorn, by the name Eugene Bullard, who had plenty of spirit, but no experience. Bullard dodged, fired back and prayed to God. He flew hell-for-leather over French territory and didn't dare look back again. Divine authority must have taken pity on him. He escaped. Minutes later, he crashed into the French Lafayette squadron airport in a jumble of wires, twisted propellers and flapping wings. A triumphant Bullard emerged, grinning and unscathed, holding in his arms his "co-pilot" a monkey. He cheerfully assured his superior commandant: "*Ca ne fait rien, mon capitaine*." ("I am perfectly o.k.") and walked away to rest for his next two-hour mission that day—a mission that the captain awaited with justifiable apprehension. The black swallow had struck again.

No one in France could deny that Bullard was a man with style. Wrote James Norman



In New York, an aging Bullard appears on the Dave Garroway Today Show in the 50s. At the time, he was employed as an elevator operator at Rockefeller Center, a former active member of the Free French Movement and Paris Post of the American Legion. Garroway displayed 14 medals, including Croix de Guerre, won in ac

Hall describing his first impression of Bullard in his book, *Lafayette Escadrille*: "Suddenly the door opened to admit a vision of military splendor such as one does not see twice in a lifetime. It was Eugene Bullard. His jolly black face shone with a grin of greeting and justifiable vanity. He wore a pair of tan aviator's boots which gleamed with mirror-like luster, and above them his breeches smote the eye with a dash of vivid scarlet. His black tunic, excellently cut and set off by a fine figure, was decorated with a pilot's badge, a *Croix de Guerre*, the *fourragère* of the Foreign Legion, and a pair of enormous wings, which left no possible doubt, even at a distance of 50 feet, as to which arm of the service he adorned. The *élèves-pilots* (student pilots) gasped, the eyes of the neophytes stood out from their heads, and I repressed a strong instinct to stand at attention."

Even his detractors admitted that Bullard's constant companion must have been Lady Luck herself. Take, for an example, the way he got into the French Air Force in the first place, a stable achievement since he was the only American Negro to fly a plane in World War I. Few other pilots would ever again match his reputation for drama, especially in the cockpit of a fighter plane.

The subject first came up in a cafe on Paris' *Boulevard St. Michel*, where Bullard was recovering from a leg wound. A veteran of France's famous Foreign Legion, one



Group portrait taken in 1923 shows Bullard (left of bar) and employees in his cabaret, "Le Grand Duc," known as "Bullard's Happy Home." Visiting Americans and Negro artists gathered nightly at Paris club, which became famous for jam sessions. To Bullard's right is boxer-bouncer Bluk McClusky.



As a boxer (left), Bullard fought his last fight in Egypt in 1922. The match was a draw but Bullard was compensated handsomely for disappointing performance. Prince Mohammed Ali Krahim of Egypt handed him \$500, told Bullard, "go out and buy yourself a drink on me."



Thirty-two years separates two gatherings of the Lafayette Escadrille. Bullard stands (4th from right) in Avor, France, 1917 (above), joins 1949 reunion (below)



Participation in official functions honoring French war dead was source of pride to Bullard. He served as flag bearer when French consul placed wreath on Lafayette's statue in Union Square, N.Y.C. (above, top), took part in consecration of Paris' famed Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (above) during last trip to France.



MONSIEUR BULLARD *Continued*

of the most bloodthirsty outfits of the war (according to the Legionnaires), Bullard was feeling no pain at the time. As someone bought him another round, he loudly suggested he could fly a plane with his crippled leg. An American told him, "Mon ami, you are crazy." It was not difficult to find someone who would disagree. "He is not crazy," someone yelled. "If he says he can fly a plane, he can fly a plane." "But Gene," the American acquaintance continued, "I've never heard of a black pilot." "He can fly, he can fly!" repeated a slightly tipsy Frenchman. The American shouted, "No he can not," and took 20 \$100 bills out of his wallet and placed them on the bar. Not to be outdone, Gene replied haughtily, "Well, I'll bet you \$2,000 that I can."

He didn't have to spend the afternoon frantically pawning his last possessions, either. The penniless Bullard telephoned a few of his old friends who held high-ranking military positions, and *volla!* Bullard was assigned to an aviation school to learn how to fly.

On May 5, 1917, clutching his pilot's license in his hand, Bullard made a return visit to the cafe. He left it amid the cheers of victory, \$2,000 richer. He also left Paris that day with an adopted "co-pilot" and "son," a tiny spider monkey he had bought from a Paris girl and christened Jimmy.

Perhaps enemy pilots wondered just what they were attacking when they met Bullard in the air. Certainly, the rakish pilot and his "son" made a strange sight in battle. With the

monkey holding on tight beside him in the open cockpit, the goggled Bullard would make swooping sorties at the Germans, much to the despair of the French commandant, who cautioned, "Be careful, *mon ami*, careful. We would not want your beautiful son Jimmy to be without a father." Caution was not for a daredevil like Bullard, however inaccurate his aim. Although he would begin firing wildly as soon as he saw a "dirty *Boche*," Gene very rarely hit anything. Once or twice he apologized to his commandant, "I couldn't control myself." The French Air Force credits him with shooting down one German plane, but Bullard claims, "I hit two, but one plane fell behind their lines."

He might conceivably have brought down more Germans if race prejudice had not terminated his career. High-ranking American military officers attached to his outfit, the Lafayette Escadrille, plotted to ground Bullard on the pretense that his leg disabled his performance.

The squadron doctor congratulated him: "You're lucky, Bullard. Thousands of men would like to be in your position and get away from the hell of this war." Bitterly disappointed, Gene said nothing, but he knew why he was being forced to leave the Escadrille. To him, bigotry was a "sickness," and he resolved that henceforth this sickness would be other people's problem, not his.

Born in Georgia in 1894, Bullard had come a long way from the Deep South, where he had learned plenty about bigotry. As a young boy in Columbus, Ga., he had seen several lynching parties first-hand when white crack-

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Joyous father, Bullard hugs daughters Lolita, 13 (L.), and Jacqueline, 10, on their safe arrival in New York from occupied France in 1940. Cordell Hull, then U. S. Secretary of State, had sent telegrams notifying Gene of plans for girls' transport from Europe.



MONSIEUR BULLARD *Continued*

ers tried to kill his father for defending himself against white bullies. Although his father escaped the mob, they later hung Gene's brother Hector for asserting his ownership of many acres of rich farm land.

As a very determined eight-year-old, Gene decided that Georgia was not the place for him. One morning, he sold his goat for \$1.50, took the money and set out for France. Why France? During those long nights when the family hid from the whites, Gene's father talked about their ancestors who lived in the French colony of Martinique and about the French ideal of equality for all people, regardless of race. Gene recalls, "I thought it would be paradise to live in France where all people could be happy without thinking of skin color."

Eugene Jacques Bullard quickly learned the art of survival. Joining a wandering troupe of English Gypsies, he was taught how to make horses look young by blackening their teeth and blowing air into their legs; he also learned how to steal food from the farmers. Later he earned top salaries for a Negro in the South by working as a horse jockey and stable boy. By the time he first saw the ocean at Newport News, Va., several years later, he was no longer that innocent child who thought he could get to France on \$1.50.

An open freight car brought him to the docks of Newport News where he saw an old German cargo ship. Three days later, sailors found a small black boy hidden in the ship's lifeboat as it chugged across the Atlantic. The captain was furious when he saw Gene and threatened to throw him into the ocean, but finally compromised by sending him down to the "sweat box" to heave coal ashes for the rest of the trip. When they reached Aberdeen, Scotland, he was dropped off.

An opportunist like Bullard could have taught Tom Sawyer a lesson. Taking advantage of the curiosity he aroused in Aberdeen, "the cute black boy" worked in amusement parks and ran favors for the local hoods and boxers (he would whistle *Yankee Doodle* outside of crap games to warn gamblers of approaching cops). He learned quite a bit from these unsavory characters: where to stay (at the British version of flop houses, called "kept houses"), how to save money (sleep with your socks on and stash the bills under your toes) and how to travel (thumb rides, hop freights). He toured the British Isles as protégé of a boxer named the Dixie Kid, and, as a welterweight boxer called Gene Madden, Bullard put on the gloves himself for several fights. This occupation proved rather unrewarding financially (he never earned more than \$60 for one fight) and temporary. When a song and dance group called "Freedman's Pickaninnies" invited him to go along with them to Paris, he jumped at the chance.

Four years later, after he lost his post as a pilot, Bullard devoted most of his energies to having a good time in Paris. The Armistice, signed Nov. 11, 1918, a few months after his reassignment, did not cause him to rejoice as millions of other Frenchmen did. Instead, he had to start thinking seriously about a job. As usual, fate came to his aid.

His many friends enjoyed treating him in cabarets, for the dapper Gene drew admiring stares from the ladies wherever he went. In one night spot, he saw his first black Dixieland band. If the brothers could do it, he thought, why couldn't he? He convinced the drummer of the band that he should teach a fellow-American how to play. A friend

said. "He wasn't too good, but it didn't seem to matter at the time. He was worried about how he was going to eat, and the cafes were crying out for black musicians and the Dixie sound. Naturally it didn't take him too long to figure out what he was going to do next."

Although Monsieur Zelli was less than astounded at Monsieur Bullard's creative musicianship, Gene convinced him that his cafe would fail without him and his resplendent "Zelli's Zig Zag Band." After all, he, Bullard, was a famous war hero, and he, Zelli, was a foreigner, an Italian. The right people knew Bullard, and, as artistic director, or host, he could assure the success of the all-night cabaret. Within two weeks Zelli's Zig Zag Band made its debut, and though the band may never be remembered for its soaring harmony, all of Paris turned out to see *bon vivant* Bullard as *directeur des artistes*. Gene claimed, "Well, you have never seen or heard of such a successful night club. Zelli knew all about the cabaret business. I had many important friends and they say I had some pull, and I used it . . . people felt they had to come to Zelli's. It was the only place in Paris that stayed open all night, and everybody who was anybody went there."

Perhaps Gene Bullard never had a true profession in the sense of a career, but he did have a definite field of interest, popularly known as "wine, women and song." His medals, his dapper attire and his boxing physique were badges of virility to hundreds of females. The dashing black pilot was not adverse to intimate *tête à tête*s with titled young ladies. After all, they had a right to know what the "war was really like," and who else could tell them with such first-hand knowledge? After the war, Bullard could also offer society invaluable service as a masseur, physical culture expert and band leader.

As *directeur des artistes*, friend of the rich, and all-around *bon vivant*, Bullard captured the fluttering heart of Marcelle Straumann whose mother was a countess and whose father was one of the wealthiest men in France. They did not object to the interracial romance, and soon Bullard married into Paris society. Gene did some sober thinking before his marriage; he would have to support his wife in a regal manner. Several months after he was married, he left Zelli's and opened up his own cafe, "Le Grand Duc," which became the watering place for an



Proud moment for Gene's daughters was his induction as Chevalier of the Legion of Honor in 1959. Mrs. Lolita Robinson (L.) and Mrs. Jacqueline Hernandez congratulate their father after ceremony (above). Deeply moved, Gene receives traditional embrace from Raymond LaPorte, consul general of France (right).



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Paris-bound again in 1951, Bullard joins a cheerful Satchmo and latter's wife, Lucille, on European tour. Gene spoke French and German fluently, acted as interpreter and aide for Armstrong in 50 cities.

MONSIEUR BULLARD *Continued*

international clientele of celebrities. He also found the necessary backing for the establishment of his own gymnasium which he called "Gene Bullard's Athletic Club."

Monsieur Bullard toured Egypt, where he boxed in two matches and was hosted by Prince Mohammed Ali Krahim, brother of Egypt's King Fouad. King Alphonse XIII's (of Spain) courtiers asked him to organize a cake walk for the King's party, and off Bullard went to Biarritz.

In spite of his immense popularity with whites, Gene made it a point to help other black artists in Paris. He hired a down-and-out fellow named Langston Hughes as a dishwasher. Hughes later described "Le Grand Duc" in his autobiographical book, *The Big Sea*: "A great many celebrities and millionaires came to the Grand Duc in those days . . . Anita Loos, and John Emerson, Young William Leeds, the Dolly Sisters, Lady Nancy Cunard, and the writer Robert McAlmon. . . . Then, when all the other clubs were closed, the best of the musicians and entertainers from various other smart places would often drop into the Grand Duc, and there'd be a jam session (until the morning)."

Gene knew everybody in Paris, but the sweet life could not last forever. After several years, Le Grand Duc closed and Bullard opened a new cafe called "L'Escadrille" after his old flying outfit. Although the new cafe did a good business, the Depression years and the growing activity of the Nazis in Germany were beginning to take their toll. Bullard's wife demanded that he leave Paris with her for the safer country retreats of Paris society, but Bullard refused to leave "the city of my dreams." Several months later, Gene's wife died, and left him with their two daughters, Jacqueline and Lolita.

Bullard continued to live his man-about-town role. He knew everyone, from the Princesse de Polignac to the members of the Paris mob, called *les Corses*. He was equally at home at midnight crap games and afternoon society teas. But his easy acquaintance with *les Corses* and the Nazis brought him his most dangerous undertaking.

As the Germans stormed Europe, government officials asked Bullard to keep his ears open and report on Nazi activities. Since the Nazis had utter contempt for him as a black man, they spoke freely in his bar and in his gym. Gene spoke fluent German, and with the aid of a French spy, "Kitty," he reported on many Nazi undertakings.

One night, *les Corses* attacked. They too were working for the Underground, but they were unaware of Gene's involvement and considered him a traitor. A drunken Corsican decided to dispatch with Bullard in his cabaret and confronted him in the men's room with a 10-inch meat cleaver. "This is your last moment alive!" the Corsican shouted dramatically. Bullard ran from the men's room with the wild Corsican at his heels. Ladies screamed and patrons hid under tables as the gallant Bullard leaped over the bar, grabbed a bottle of Beaujolais and smashed his assailant over the head. For good measure, he also kicked him several times. The Corsican barely survived after six months in the hospital, but *les Corses* forgave Gene anyway as a fellow member of the Resistance.

Meanwhile, the Germans were marching towards Paris and the city



Military tradition spans three generations as Bullard and grandson Richard Reid, Jacqueline's son, pose together in uniform. Gene suffered loss of one eye, lame leg, severed spine and innumerable other wounds after two wars and many private battles.

MONSIEUR BULLARD *Continued*

panicked. True to form, Bullard hid a gun in his cafe, ready to fight it out with the Nazis on the streets when they invaded. Cooler heads prevailed, however, and "Kitty" persuaded Gene to surrender the weapon. She told him that to defy the Nazis as a black American would mean certain death, and advised him to "get out of France fast," offering to take care of his daughters until she could send them to the U.S. safely.

Gene finally took her advice and fled the country along with thousands of other refugees via a Red Cross embarkation point in Portugal. Hundreds of people were lying crippled and starving along the road, but Bullard simply lifted a bicycle in Bordeaux, travelled light and persuaded friends to treat him to meals along the way.

Back in the United States, he found the life of a middle-aged black man much less exciting. His back had been injured during one of his Paris knock-em-down brawls, and he found it painful to work at heavy labor. He gave up a job as a stevedore, later toured Europe after the war as a factotum and interpreter for Louis Armstrong. In 1940, "Kitty" sent Bullard's daughters over, as promised, and Gene paid for their fares with contributions from the Negro Actors League and ex-members of the Lafayette Escadrille.

He was getting old and mellow: he fondly remembered his former escapades in Paris, and thought of his survival through bloody adventures as "acts of God."

Gene never forgot his days with the Foreign Legion—the "swallows of death"—and with the Lafayette Escadrille. He remained a loyal member of the American Legion, Paris Post, for many years. Bullard wanted to go back to Paris to live someday and to reopen a small cafe; then he would resume the wonderful days of his youth. But he had changed, and so had his beloved Paris. In 1961, Eugene Bullard died. All that he left were his medals and his small Harlem apartment plastered with the photos of his famous friends, almost all of them dead. The man who cherished them and their adventures together in Paris was dead, too.

