

My Walter Tull Journey

THERE is nothing to make Walter Tull's name stand out on the white stone panels of the Arras Memorial in Northern France. It lies, unremarkably, amidst 35,000 others - all courageous souls who gave the ultimate sacrifice on the bloody battlefields of the First World War.

Yet in life, Tull could not help but stand out. As a Black boy from a working class Kent family in the late 19th century, he overcame barriers in both class and ethnicity to become not only the first Black outfield football player in the First Division, but also the first Black infantry officer in the British Army at a time when non-Europeans were prohibited from joining the ranks.

His achievements are, quite simply, incredible. Yet in the annals of history, he is often a forgotten hero - something I was determined to change when I began writing my biography of him *Walter Tull, 188-1918. Officer, Footballer 'All The Guns In France Couldn't Wake Me'*.

In September, 2008, I re-visited the Faubourg d'Amiens War Memorial Cemetery in Arras to pay my respects to Walter, who died March 25, 1918, at the Second Battle of the Somme, aged just 29. His body was never found. It was the second time I'd visited the memorial and it marked the culmination of more than 15 years of research into the life of this reluctant hero.

My journey began in 1993 at a Black and Asian Studies Association (BASA) conference where historian David Killingray enquired if I'd heard of Tull. I had, but only in Maurice Golesworthy's *Encyclopaedia of Association Football* where his name is listed as D. Tull under the section marked 'Coloured Players'. It was just the first of many careless mistakes I'd encounter while researching his life. My interest was piqued and so, for the next two weeks, I ensconced myself at the British Library Newspaper Library in North West London, on a quest to find out more. So began an investigation, a research project, that continues to this day.

But let me tell you a little more about this amazing man's dramatic, traumatic, heroic life before continuing with my journey of discovery. Walter Daniel John Tull was one of six children born in Folkestone in 1888 to Alice Palmer, an English mother from Kent and Daniel Tull, a carpenter from Barbados. His mother died from breast cancer when Tull was only 6, followed two years later by his father who died of heart disease. In order to save the whole family from the workhouse Walter and his older brother Edward, were sent to Dr Stephenson's Home and Orphanage in Bethnal Green at the turn of the century. Edward was adopted by a Glaswegian family 33 months later. Walter's isolation, while devastating, galvanised rather than broke this remarkable young man.

A gifted footballer, Walter was signed for Tottenham Hotspur in 1909 but only made seven first-team appearances before he was dropped to the reserves. Could this have been due to the shocking racial taunts he received from opposition fans when he played? One report at the time said Bristol City supporters used language 'lower than Billingsgate' and one can only imagine some of the despicable abuse he encountered. But Tull rose above it and in 1911 was signed for a 'substantial fee' to Northampton Town and made 110 first team appearances.

When war broke out in 1914, he was one of the first to enlist, promoted three times during training, reaching the rank of lance sergeant. He was one of the few Black men in the British Army at time when cultural attitudes to people of colour cast them as inferior to Whites. Military ideology believed the morale of troops would be undermined by serving alongside Black soldiers.

Despite suffering shellshock in 1916, described as 'acute mania' in documents, he soon returned to fight in the Battle of the Somme. Respected by his men and his superior officers for his soldierly qualities he was recommended for a commission contrary to military law which prohibited men of colour from becoming infantry officers. Gazetted as a 2nd Lieutenant in May 1917 Tull created history once more by becoming the first Black infantry officer in the British Army.

After fighting at Passchendaele and the Somme he was posted to the Italian front. He was cited for his 'gallantry and coolness' after leading his platoon in a raid across the front line on New Years Day 1918, bringing each of his 26 men back unharmed. His commanding officer recommended him for the Military Cross.

Returning to my journey, we are now in the mid-nineties. After researching at the Newspaper Library in Colindale, the British Library, the University Library in Cambridge and the National Archives at Kew – then called the Public Records Office – I was by now totally captivated by his story. Desperate to add meat to the bones of what I had discovered I sent letters to anyone possibly linked with Tull - however tenuous - begging for scraps of biographical clothing. Through records held by British Dental Association I discovered his dentist brother Edward's address at time of death in Edinburgh and I scribbled more letters to free newspapers in the Lothian region, appealing for information.

Within days I received letters from former patients of Edward's. They were all written with affection but none brought me up to speed about the whereabouts of surviving family. Then, a breakthrough. Two letters arrived revealing the address of Edward's only child, a daughter Jean and her husband, a retired Church of Scotland minister, the Reverend Duncan Finlayson. I fired off a desperate plea to the Finlaysons and the reply was swift: find your way to the West Highlands.

Jean Finlayson welcomed me into their cottage, a stone's throw from Loch Creran, 23 miles north of Oban as a long-lost friend. There, laid out ready on their dining room table was a biographer's dream - boxes of precious memorabilia relating simply to 'Uncle Walter'. It was a wealth of family treasure - files, albums, note books, documents and letters - all wonderful primary sources of information.

I felt a kaleidoscope of emotions: for a historian such a wealth of primary material, untouched and unresearched, is akin to looking for a dropped 50 pence down the back of the sofa and finding a lost lottery ticket containing 6 winning numbers. Had I been alone I would have reacted with uncharacteristic histrionics. Not having the freedom of uninhibited self-indulgence I instead quietly luxuriated in the hoard of riches before me.

Seeing Walter's handwriting for the first time was a wonderful moment. He was an eloquent writer and his penmanship was beautiful. Here were letters from the Orphanage where Walter was raised as well as correspondence he'd sent home en-route to

Argentina and Uruguay as he travelled with his football team. He writes on one of feeling a 'little queer with sunstroke' - something that must have bemused his fellow pale-skinned travellers. Most poignantly, there were letters describing the living hell of the Western Front, one describing how he spent 36 hours or more without sleep or food, burrowing through dirty tunnels under the German front line.

On a lighter note, there were postcards of Walter at White Hart Lane, his citation for gallantry, a cup winners gold medal, photo albums and more. Jean told me that her father described his brother's death as 'the worst moment of my life' - but as a result, he lived life to the full, never wasting a moment.

Talented and attractive as he was, Walter never married and there is no mention of a girlfriend. Some students have questioned his sexuality - I'm not so sure. In his obituary there is mention of his landlady, a Miss Annie Williams, whom he lived with in Rushton while playing for Northampton. She was 18 at the time, a little young to be a landlady. Given the attitudes toward mixed relationships at the time - and towards a man and a woman living together unmarried - perhaps the status 'landlady' was a discrete metaphor for something more intimate. However, there is no clear evidence of them being a couple.

On the second time I visited the cemetery in Arras, while making a documentary with Dan Snow for the BBC, a small wooden cross had been laid in homage to Walter. For me, it spoke volumes as to his appeal - it was from Impington Village College, an overwhelmingly White school in a suburb of Cambridge.

Resuscitating him has been an enormous privilege and has helped my understanding of Britain's past, in particular its cultural attitudes towards people of colour. While popular opinion still holds that elite Anglo-Saxons rode high over the brown 'races' in the early part of the last century, in truth, people's attitudes towards black and Asian people were not universally negative. And today, as I talk about Walter at schools and colleges across the country, it's clear the breadth of his appeal to both Black, White and mixed heritage people.

Walter has now been officially acknowledged as an important figure in British history. Not only with his inclusion in the Dictionary of National Biography but also as one of the 100 Greatest Black Britons.

As well as writing a play for the Octagon Theatre, Bolton and having a screenplay in development with Araguaya Films about his compelling life, there is a campaign for the Ministry of Defence to award the Military Cross for which he was recommended almost a century ago. It's the very least we as a country can do to honour his memory.

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