

## Press Release

### Walter Tull, English Hero – so why haven't you heard of him?

#### 93<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary of his death 25<sup>th</sup> March

The 25<sup>th</sup> March marks a lonely anniversary. There should be parades, bunting, crowds. But there will not be a single Reveille. On that day ninety-three years ago an authentic hero died in the Second Battle of the Somme. A Boys Own hero, a sporting legend who had played for Spurs, a leader of men who had stood side by side with them as they went over the top in some of the most dangerous fighting in modern warfare. A man who had been sent into care after the early death of his parents, separated from his brother and left to survive alone. A man of principle, impeccable morals, and the highest standards. An example, an icon, a man you probably haven't heard of.

This man was Walter Tull.

Walter Tull was born in Folkestone in 1888. By 1900, both his Barbadian father and his English mother were dead. Walter and his elder brother Edward were placed in a children's' home in Bethnal Green.

Spotted while playing for the children's' home team, he was invited to join Clapton, a top amateur team, in 1908. Helping them to victory in the FA Amateur Cup, the London Senior Cup and the London County Amateur Cup that same season, he was soon attracting the attention of other clubs. It was Tottenham Hotspur who moved in for him, trialing him in their 'A' and reserve teams throughout the season. Still an amateur, Walter Tull was invited to tour Argentina and Uruguay with Spurs, signing as a professional on his return. After only seven first team games, he was dropped. This may have been a consequence of the racial abuse he received playing at Bristol City. Rather than stand by Tull, the Spurs management consigned their young star to the reserves.

In 1911, Herbert Chapman signed him for Southern League Northampton Town where he stayed until, like many of his contemporaries, he joined the army in September 1914. Serving in the famous 'Footballers' Battalion' the 17th Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, he reached the rank of Sergeant. Still able to play football when on leave, he guested for Fulham in 1915.

Recommended for a commission, Walter Tull became an officer cadet in 1917. Commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 23rd Battalion in the Middlesex Regiment, he was mentioned in dispatches early the following year.

The strange thing is this. There was a ban of black men becoming officers in the British Army. It was somehow ungentlemanly to have a man of colour leading white men into battle. Yet that is what Tull did, heroically.

He was destined for further greatness. In 1917, Tull signed for Glasgow Rangers. Unfortunately, Walter Tull didn't live to lead the Ibrox attack in the same way that he had led his soldiers. He was killed in action during the German Spring Offensive of March 1918 whilst serving with the 23rd Battalion, the Middlesex Regiment.

Walter, like many professional players, had joined the Football Battalion in 1914. The Army recognised Tull's stature as a leader and he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant.

In July 1916, Tull took part in the major Somme offensive. Tull survived this experience but in December 1916 he developed trench fever and was sent home to England to recover. Tull had impressed his senior officers who recommended that he should be considered for further promotion.

When he recovered from his illness, instead of being sent back to France, he went to the officer training school at Gales in Scotland. Despite military regulations forbidding “any negro or person of colour” being an officer, Tull received his commission in May, 1917.

Tull became the first Black combat officer in the British Army. [Phil Vasili](#) celebrates this in his superb story and scholarly work, [‘Walter Tull, Officer, Footballer – All The Guns In France Couldn’t Wake Me’](#) (Raw Press **ISBN-10:** 0956395406 **ISBN-13:** 978-0956395405) He relates, “According to The Manual of Military Law, Black soldiers of any rank were not desirable. During the First World War, military chiefs of staff, with government approval, argued that White soldiers would not accept orders issued by men of colour and on no account should Black soldiers serve on the front line.”

Lieutenant Walter Tull was sent to the Italian front. This was epoch-making in its own right because Tull was the first ever black officer in the British Army. He led his men at the Battle of Piave and was mentioned in dispatches for his “gallantry and coolness” under fire.

Tull stayed in Italy until 1918 when he was transferred to France to take part in the attempt to break through the German lines on the Western Front. On 25th March, 1918, 2nd Lieutenant Tull was ordered to lead his men on an attack on the German trenches at Favreuil. On penetrating No Man’s Land Tull was hit by a German bullet. Tull was loved by his men and several of them ran under a hail of machine gun bullets to try and bring him back. These efforts were in vain as Tull had died soon after being hit.

One of the soldiers who tried to rescue him later told his commanding officer that Tull was “killed instantaneously with a bullet through his head.” Tull’s body was never recovered.

So on the 25<sup>th</sup> March the distant guns of the Western Front will lay silent. The campaign to award Walter Tull a posthumous Military Cross after an Early Day Motion in June 2008 failed will also fall silent. The fluttering white papers of bureaucracy in Whitehall will fall like feathers over the memories of gallantry against impossible odds. The battle for Walter Tull began the day he was born in Folkestone in 1888, an Englishman of valour and faith. He died a hero twenty-nine years later.

The German Army shot him. His body was never found. And yet we have still managed to bury him.

## **Ends**

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