

SIDE A

R: Were you born in England?

S: I was born in Jamaica in one of your former colonies, 20th Febraury 1926. When I was eighteen they were asking for people to help the mother country and I volunteered. I couldn't volunteer before because I was too young. I came, did my little bit, went all over the British Isles, had to go back to Jamaica after the war in 1947. I did not like to live in the colony of Jamaica. I came back on the SS Empire Windrush. You might have heard of the Windrush. and I played a little part. I rejoined the forces because it was very difficult to get accommodation. Eventually I applied to buy a house, 9 Sears Street in Southwark. I was in the forces then in Scotland. They sent me a letter, thanked me very much but recommended I go back to the colony of Jamaica. I lived to sit in the conference in Southwark and tell them that I now live in Southwark and am among the living here. Because of we returning to England on the SS Empire Windrush on the 22nd June 1948, thousands of people from the colonies, maybe millions, are all living in Britain today because before that there were not a lot of people from the colonies living in England. You had a few in Limehouse and Liverpool and a few in Manchester, Cardiff, and that's that. But in places like Southwark, nearly fifteen percent are from the minority or outside of the British Islands.

R: When you first came when you were eighteen, what was the publicity in Jamaica?

S: There was not a lot of publicity. I've got cuttings from the newspaper at that time where the British government have asked the people from the colonies to volunteer. Try and remember that Britain was at war and Britain could not have beat the Gremans on their own. After Dunkirk, which to me was a miracle, Sir Stafford Cripps say "For gods sake send us more planes and men". The German Panzers were running around Europe shooting up people like how you shoot pigeons.

R: In Jamaica you thought of Britain as the mother country?

S: Yes. In places like Barbados they still do that. The queen is in South Africa and most of those emotions is not that because after the last three hundred years and before, you people have ruled a quarter of the world. It wasn't perfect but it was better than say, the Spaniards. The Spaniards when they went to the New World, their idea was to get yellow metal, not people. The British were not a lot better but at least they did think about the people. At least you had missionaries and you taught us to play cricket. By accident we learned that.

R: By accident you got better at it than we did! You came over, was it simply because the mother country needed you, were you looking forward to it, was it also excitement?

S: It was excitement. I am from...I don't know if you know much about Maroons in Jamaica. The Maroons in Jamaica fought the British for two hundred years and didn't beat them. They live in the mountains and things like that. Secondly, my background from Africa is from the Ashanti, and military is part of their everyday thing. But we genuinely felt that it was our duty to help the mother country. Secondly, it was excitement. I was young. For young men, war and fighting is a normal thing. I was well aware of war. One of 5the few books we had in my home was "The Nations at War" bought by my father when he went to America as a young man, and I knew more about war than about acadmic schooling because I read "The Nations at War" - First World War - and I knew the terrible thing. They sent men in some fronts in France like you would peel potatoes - Just fed men to stuff in the gap. For example, Churchill in the Dardanelles. I think they fed 75,000 men in the Dardanelles and the Turks cut them down as you cut down wheat. For nothing. But at that time the generals thought they were doing the right thing. So yes, I was well aware. Secondly, I didn't know the depths of the war - not all you read, but they only tell you what they want to tell you. When I was about sixteen or seventeen,

when you come from Priestland or Portland, the Eastern side of Jamaica, when you go down to the beach in the morning you get lots of timber and things from sinking ships. I didn't know that for every three ships that crossed the Atlantic, one stayed at the bottom and is still there. What I did know was that a lot of other ships were being sunk, but they wouldn't tell you that. After a while we didn't pick up the lumber from the beaches because the police said that if you had especially gasoline that came from off the sunken ships, you must hand it back, so the people had to leave them on the beaches and the police and military people came and collected them. Of course you read in the newspaper about the Grass Pay (?) because it happened in the South Atlantic. And you read about the Russian Panzers, but you didn't have the depth of it. They would only tell you the nice part.

R: When you arrived, how were you received?

S: Very well, but try and remember - there is a war on. I remember arriving at Greenock. It was a cold November and it was snowing and all that. The Salvation Army came on the troop ship train and gave you a cup of tea and a bun. You saw children with labels around their neck and labels on their back and a little suitcase or something, and the docks were bombed. It was dirty grey. There were not that many people about but the people that you did see welcomed because they was at war and you came to help. When I eventually got to the camp, we were all welcomed in the community because we were needed. The old Commonwealth - people from Norway to Sudan - I had the privilege of living with or meeting them. At that time we were all thrown together because of need ...(?).

R: Did the attitude towards you change?

S: Oh yes. When the war was over, things started - it's like the council said "You should go back to the colonies". Noone told us that there was no work. There is not much work in the colonies. But here in England they were taking ex-prisoners of war from Italy to work in the kilns in Bedford and we who had a certain amount of skill, because I worked in aircraft during the war, they said "No. You'd better go back to the colonies". I didn't have a vote and I thought, for the people in Poland to have a vote, I decided not to live in the colonies.

R: You didn't have a vote here in Britain, you mean?

S: No. I didn't have a vote in the colonies.

R: Why not?

S: I'm not being rude, man. You must do your homework. The colonies is like - a better example in Hong Kong - does the people in Hong Kong have a vote today? I'm not being funny. I'm asking you a factual thing.

R: No. I don't think they do.

S: Thankyou. They do not have a vote. That is what this thing is about. In the colonies they do not give people votes. You give people votes in the colonies if you are a ruling class. If you have above average land or income.

R: So you wanted to stasy in Britain because here you would have a vote?

S: In a sense yes. And a better quality of life. I want that all for myself. In the colonies health, welfare, jobs and a vote was not given to the people. It want extremely bad as long as you do what you're told you were left alone. But here you have a voice.

R: Obviously you didn't have a vote here in 1945...

S: The irony of it is, just after the war, I was in Piccadilly Manchester. The whole of Picadilly, the centre of Manchester was bombed. It was a bomb site. The great Churchill came there to

speak. I was in uniform. I want to see Churchill and want to hear him speak. They would not let Churchill speak in Piccadilly Manchester in 1946 just after the war. There was a miner with a dirty face and I asked him "Why don't people let the great Churchill speak?" He said "Boy". I had 'Jamaica' on my shoulder. "I can see you're from the colonies. You do not understand. When he was the Home Secretary and my father, we went on strike after the first war, we got beaten back to the mines". So yes, in England I had a vote. But in the colonies I did not have a vote. I think I was the same person. They think I am different!

R: So what was your attitude towards that election in 45?

S: I thought Churchill should have been elected but the fact that they still want the colonies to remain as it is, I was against the Conservative mentality. Now Labour, the Socialists under Atlee thought the colonies, especially India, there are more Indians who won VC fighting for the nation per thousand than the British people. They might not tell you that but if you go to the war museum and check it out, that is so. These people volunteered to fight for freedom for the mother country. When the mother country said "No. We should rule you." Montgomery after the war said "You Indians make a noise. You give me ten divisions and I will keep you quiet", but Atlee said "No. They are entitled to". Secondly, the British people might not realise but the Americans under Roosevelt, during the North Atlantic Treaty said "Right, we will fight Germany, but in the same manner we are fighting to give those people freedom of expression, the people in the colonies should have freedom". So in a sense, whether Churchill liked it or not, to get the American aid and help, the British Empire was as good as dead because the Americans said "We were colonies and the colonies cannot fight you but you should let them have a vote". Once you let people have a vote they are able to decide about their children, health, welfare, et cetera.

R: Do you think the Americans may have had mixed motives themselves?

S: Oh yes. They knew what they were doing. The Americans were not doing it for us directly or indirectly. The American trade like Coca-Cola - you see Coca-Cola over the world. Whereby you rule a quarter of the world, the Americans rule nearly half the world through trade. The cinema, Coca-Cola trading, for example is an extreme case. Some bandits in Russia wanted money to release captives. They didn't ask for roubles, they asked for American dollars. It might seem stupid but those bandits are not stupid because the rouble isn't worth anything and the American dollars can buy things anywhere in the world.

R: During the war when you were over here, what was the exact job that you were doing?

S: I was an aircraft finisher. For example, a Spitfire having been made at the factory, it can't go to the squadron until it is modified. It had to be painted, your numbers go on it. It was proven by some professor, that most aircraft, especially fighters, if you finish their body with a little extra aerodynamics - if they were built for say 300 miles an hour - you could get 350 miles an hour. And that was my job, to finish aircraft. There were little modifications. The professors would work out that if you move this little thing here the reception would be better. For example Mosquitos were the fastest aircraft we had during the war. With the modification you could get that little bit extra, 50 miles an hour, out of it. The guns might fire more accurately if you undo the stabilisers. That was my job, aircraft finisher. I worked on almost every aircraft piston engine. We didn't have jets officially. I saw something flying about March 1945. I am taught that you have to have air screw for aerodynamics. I was seeing this thing flying without no air screw. I asked some officer. He said "You haven't seen it".

R: Was it the prototype for the Comet?

S: Yes. Gloucester Meteor. I've never seen a jet aircraft during the war. Sorry, I've seen it flown but I've never seen it to touch and I've never worked on it, but I've worked on all piston aircraft from Hanson to Lancasters and all that, gliders.

R: You were a young man during the war. How about friendships, meeting girls, that sort of thing. How did that work out in Britain?

S: I went to Nottingham, my first leave. A Jamaican friend, I think it was a Friday evening I got there. He said "Lets go to the cinema. Stop at the YMCR, the forces club." Do you know Nottingham? You have London Road, the station, there used to be a cinema near London Road. I went to the cinema with my friend and the girl put me at the back of the cinema. I was assaulted by a lady after half an hour in the pictures. I was assaulted by a woman. After this film was over and I came out she said she would like to see me the next day. I said "I'll think about it". I'm not perfect but I am a Christian, but I saw films about VD in the camp, a Canadian film, and I am extremely sensitive about loose women. Of course I was young and I am normal and I want as much loose women as possible, but I don't want VD! Gradually I knew that it was easy to have girlfriends in places like Nottingham. The men went out of the town when they had coal mining and the women came in the town to work at Boots and the cigarette factories so there would be five women for every three men. Secondly, most of the men had been away for three years anyway and we, the air force and Americans, were there. But the ratio of men to women was still in the men's favour. So I found that a girlfriend was too easy. We always assumed in the colonies that the English lived a good standard. I was a little bit surprised to see the houses that the average Englishman then had, he had one suit that he wears at weekend and one that he wears to work. I had the privilege of being with some men and one fellow got a letter, this was an English group. His mother was living in Derby. He got a letter and the landlord said to his mother that after the war he has to move. In a nutshell, his mother was living in rented accommodation and the landlord was going to raise the rent and he and his mother would have to move. He was very worried. Now I came from an environment where we were poor materially but we had our own land. So here you have an Englishman, don't have any land, which to me in the colony can't make sense because we thought most English people had a reasonable standard. The missionaries and teachers and people that we met in the colonies were chiefly middle class and they gave you the impression - they were talking from their background. I also read Charles Dickens, and my mother who is reasonable, always pointed out that you have poverty in England, through Dickens novels and things like that. So, it was surprising, but it was wartime. We in the colonies didn't have rations relating to food. In Britain you could not buy a pound of sugar because the Germans were sinking all the ships. In a nutshell we were well received, we were well treated during the war, I was invited to homes. In a sense I was fortunate, I have an English mother. I still have one today - she is in a home in Shrewsbury. Her son and I were at RA Camps (?) and they invited me home and I became a part of their family, and still is. She's 95 now or something. So I live in an English environment.

R: Was that an unusual relationship? Did other people who came over with you have similar relationships with English people?

S: Yes it was like that. Most of us who were in the RAF had English relationships because, one, you were staying at RAF Hawkings (?), the local farmer invited me to talk about farming - well, they invited some West Indians and I was the only peasant among them. So there was that relationship. You were working with English men and some of them you had a reasonable relationship and you realise that sub-consciously you are talking. I said "Yes. My sister was doing piano but maybe we can't afford it". Now, I'm talking about piano lessons in the West Indies. My wife played piano, she didn't play here - she played it in the West Indies. Now, not many English, average people had a piano. So they start realising "These people are from the colonies but at least they can play cricket. They are not as stupid and green."

R: Towards the end of the war, with the election, did you take any part in the election campaign?

S: No. The forces had nothing to do with that. In the camp you were free to vote but you were not free to say anything. Which is quite right - Military should have nothing to do with politics.

R: So there was no campaigning within the forces at all?

S: No, no. You had the forces broadcast and things like that and occasionally the politicians would broadcast on it, but you had no say.

R: Do you think people in general were optimistic about what Labour might achieve?

S: Yes. Try and remember that we were at war and things were rationed and all that. Although Churchill as the main leader gave us, with other people, I think three quarters of a million dead - he gave us freedom. The people at the Russian front, 15 million, no 20 million Russians paid for it. So we were hopeful from a Socialist point of view. Another thing is, the government carried on rationing, I think they had to. People wanted the end of rationing. The Labour Party if I remember didn't say you weren't to stop rationing. They said you'd have a fair distribution of wealth. People like Lord Lovett, hero and all that, who died recently, he had an estate, but the cream of the milk went to his manor house. So we are saying that of course he should have milk but we want some of the cream as well. That was the Labour mentality. And the people voted that and of course the ruling class as you know, took their money and put them in Switzerland. And if we should have a Labour government again, I think a lot of them would do that. You have to be practical with movement of money today, that you have to take them into consideration and not necessarily tax them to level out things. And even if you level out things anyway, after a while the people who can grab will have more. But of course we should have better education and better health care.

R: Health care was very important in that election, wasn't it?

S: Yes because before there were children going to school who could not read, not because they were stupid, but because they didn't have any glasses. And the parents could not afford the glasses. Another factor came out - children were undernourished, but during the war - I think it was the 1944 Education Act - people had hope because most people realised that education was the key. In the colonies I still think and thought then that education was the key. We weren't exactly stupid in the colonies, but only about two per cent of the people in the colonies had higher education. But the people who ran the colonies didn't run the colonies for the benefit of the colonies. The Romans didn't have Judea and all that for the benefit of those people. They ran it for economical reasons.

R: After the end of the war, when you were told you ought to get back to the colonies now, what did you feel about that?

S: Very sad. I was doing sanitary engineering at a correspondence course. I never had the chance of doing engineering. From a farming background, I'm the eldest son, my father took it for granted that I was going to be a farmer. That's all right but the only thing is we have no say in the selling of the produce so once I have arrived here I was taught by correspondence course because I moved from one camp to another. Once you finished a squadron you don't know what is happening. You were just told to move to another squadron and I want to learn something. If I am here I would have a better chance academically. But they said "No. You are not here to learn. You are here to fight. The war is finished. Go back to the colonies". I had to go back to the colonies. The minute I touched the colonies - by then most colonies still had a governor but Jamaica, while I left, had internal self government where people could leave. Now before, in lots of other colonies and even in Hong Kong today, you can't leave Hong Kong and come to say, England. But in those days you could. so the minute I step on the shore of Jamaica from the war, I was planning to return to England.

R: What did your family feel about that?

S: Very sad. My father's attitude was, I'm the eldest son, I should be looking after cows, pimento, bananas, because we had an odd acre or two, and I would be him in 50 years time when he's gone. Now once I have seen that in England roughly 15 percent of the land is devastated and has to be rebuilt - so there's work. I can also see that there is opportunity for myself to improve academically, and hoping that my brother and sister might follow. That did

happen. So yes, my parents did not want us to leave. But a lot of the young men realised - during the war some went to the Panama Canal and worked on it as technicians and carpentry and tradesmen, a large amount of men went to America as well and worked in the factories and on the farms. Once the war was over, they were all thrown back to Jamaica. The men who were in the forces also had to be thrown back, so there was large unemployment there. So the young men like myself realised that that would not work because we were not going to stand for the old colonial system - No! We had seen Europe, we had read. So I want to leave, so most of the young people want to leave, the older people don't. There was a mentality in my village that you, the average man, can't come to England. Because normally it is the elite of the students come as a pastor or something like that and return back, because that's what they told them. No, I was not very bright, but I had been.

R: You said you were sad to be told to go back to the colonies. Why are you also not bitter about it?

S: I was sad but I grew up in a colony and I had no vote, I had no say. I was a little bit sensible in school for example - I don't think I could pass much exams because I'd decided I was not going to learn history because the history books said that all the Jamaican - what I call - heroes, were bad. For example Paul Bogle (?) who is now our national hero, at that given time, he is a wicked man and they hanged him. All he did was to ask them for betterment for his people, they would not give it to him and he revolted. Now at the back of my mind, that's unjust. So the whole colonial system there, I'm against it, but it was very difficult for me. We are talking - "Oh no. You can't say that! You mustn't let anybody hear that." This was the mentality of the colonies.

R: And could it have got you into trouble?

S: Oh yes. But most of the people who went behind bars, like Buster Manti (?), a year after he became the prime minister. To show you that you could get in trouble, the first Saturday in November, I was in Manchester. I came late from the camp so I could not get accommodation in the forces place. I had to get accommodation at the YMCA near Albert Square, near Victoria Station in Manchester, more like a student place. While I was there, an African student gave me a leaflet and invited me to a meeting the next evening, which was Saturday evening, at the Corn Exchange. I want girls like anybody but remember I'm very sensitive about VD so I decided to go to this meeting. When I went in my big overcoat - remember rationing is still on, the war was just over, things were rationed - when I look in the hall I saw about twenty Africans, West Indian students. They looked terrible. Their overcoat was - we had nice uniform - but their civilian overcoat looked shabby and all that. Well, I tried to get in but the African at the door of the Corn Exchange said "I'm very sorry, you're in uniform, you can't come in". But he gave me this leaflet surreptitiously and the leaflet said "We the undersigned demand freedom from the imperialist British Empire, signed Krumer, Kenyatta, De Bowles (?) and a Jamaican - I don't know if it was Seely - but the real brains behind it was not Krumer Kenyatta or De Bowles, it was Seely. Most of those went to prison. I had those in my kit bag for a long while, then I realised if an officer saw me with these in my kit bag...I have nothing against going behind bars but I don't know what will happen to me because in the colonies sometimes they dispose of you indirectly. So yes, I was very sensitive, and my father - "You can't say.." I am boiling in the colonies. I'm not trying to say Britain is all bad, let's get this straight, but what I want is a vote and a job and I didn't have that. To my older grandparents, they accepted that - "You can't fight the British. We have tried it in the old days, Nonny and all the Jamaican people have tried it and they shoot them and things like that".

R: You went back to Jamaica and you came back over. Was that in 1947?

S: 20th of June 1948. SS Empire Windrush.

R: Is that when you came to London, to Southwark?

S: No. The housing situation in England was very bad. About 15 percent of the housing was damaged. On the boat I decided to go back into the Royal Airforce because I know having left England, to get accommodation would be difficult although I have English friends. I had a telegram on the ship. I was one of the few people had a telegram - "Welcome home". I could have gone to 2 Renshaw Corner, Mitcham with my English mother and my English friend. But before I left Jamaica my father said to me I must stand on my own two feet if I come back to England so I thought it would be wide to go back to the Royal Airforce, sort myself out and then come out as a civilian, which I did.

R: How did they welcome you back into the Air Force?

S: As long as you didn't stay over six months you came back to your same job. So yes, you were welcome. Funnily enough, they would have let me stay, now that I'm paying my own passage back, and by then the Russians were getting a bit strong and they wanted more people in the Air Force. Because shortly after, we had the Berlin Airlift. So they were begging people to come back in the Air Force and we who wanted to stay six months, five months before, they said no. They took me back in. The Air Force was like a second home at that time. There were laws and all that and you followed it. But it was not too bad.

R: After you left the Air Force, when did you come to Southwark?

S: In 1953 I applied to the Council again for a mortgage and they said no. 9 Sears Street, the house is still there off New Church Road. At Camberwell Green, going towards Elephant & Castle, the second traffic light is New Church Road. You turn right and 9 Sears Street is the second street on your right. We bought it with my brother. When I was in the Air Force, about a year after I arrived I sent for my brother that followed me. After about a year he had been here, that would be about 1950, he said we should buy a house. It was his idea because it was difficult for him to get accommodation. Very difficult. For example, he was in a place in Stockwell. I went to see him when I was on leave. When I was on leave I normally worked at Mann Crossman Pauline (?), Mile End, say two weeks leave - I would work for one week and maybe have another week somewhere. I went to see him. I went up to his room once. We went out for fish and chips and we were going up there. The landlady said "No. You can't go up the stairs. You don't live there." I said "Excuse me. It's my brother". She said "Yes. But you might be wearing out the carpet". I said "I'm in the Royal Airforce". I was a Corporal then. "I have a little room by myself. We are in a billet of about 45 men." Anyway, I had reasonable freedom. But here, although you had a room, in most cases it was shared with other people, and you were very restricted. So my brother said we have to buy a house. Now, when I said to my English friend that we were going to buy a house, they said "You can't. Because the average English man don't own a house". My family was the second black person in Southwark to buy a house. My brother and other people have what you call a partner - you'd call it Christmas plum - The first house to be bought in Southwark by a black person is 93 Upland Road and it is still there today. The gentleman who owns it, he was with Montgomery in the desert. He's a Jamaican and he is very active in the West Indian Ex-Servicemen. I can give you his name but I don't think he will talk. He has seen real war. Secondly, he feels that in most cases, and I agree with him here, that the journalist use us. Naturally, you are using me now indirectly to do your thing. He won't. My attitude is that the people should know that we came, we fought, we died. The young British blacks should know that. These Neo-Fascists, round about should know that.

R: It seems that the war had an enormous effect on the lives of people like you - You came to Europe, whereas otherwise you probably wouldn't have done, and you stayed, so that it did change the course of that bit of colonial and anti-colonial history.

S: Hitler said to Britain that we should not fight because if you fight you will lose your Empire. Hitler was wrong in many things but in some cases he was right. The Americans said that after the war your empire cannot stay as it is. Yes, the war indirectly helped us for freedom and helped me to be here. Would my quality of life be better if I was in the West Indies still? In the colony? No. If Jamaica has been freed? I think most of the colonies been freed, indirectly is

because we contributed something, because how could you not let a man who fought for Poland have a vote in the colony? The British are reasonable. In cricket they have a reasonable system. As long as you could intelligently reason, said "Well, if I bowl straight, if the ball hit the wicket, that's your rule". Your rule is to say that if a man is a reasonable person, he should have a vote. I must be reasonable because I risked my life to help you to have freedom and the Poles. So I think the colonies and the war helped indirectly. Also the fact that we came here and other people in the Empire, namely the Indians and that, started coming here, the man in the street said "Wait a minute - These people are over there. They came here. They can drive bus, they can work in the factories, they can work in the hospitals. Now we don't want them here to take our jobs. We've got nothing against them. You should let them stay where they are and if you let them stay where they are, you should let them have freedom". It is a roundabout way but yes, we won because we went in the war. Two - coming here on the SS Windrush, we have done more to let the colonies be free than other people realise. The hunter became the hunted. We were now in Westminster, not in Jamaica.

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