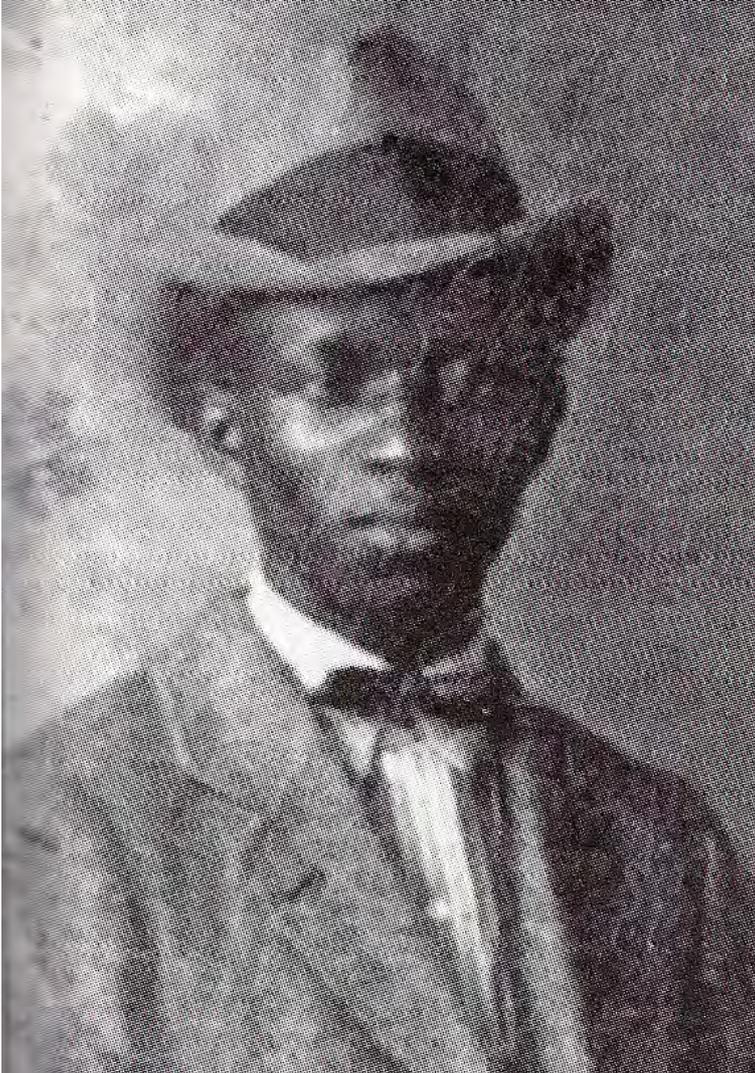


LIONEL TURPIN

A soldier caught out at the end of the war



© Battling Jack: You Gotta Fight Back by Jackie Turpin and W. Terry Fox (Mainstream Publishing, 2005)

Early Life

Lionel Turpin was born in British Guiana and served in the merchant navy before enlisting in the army in 1915. He always 'felt British'.

Rumour has it that he left home at the age of sixteen because of a falling out with his father. It's likely he worked his passage as a stoker to make it to England, before settling in Liverpool, to work as a labourer.

War

Lionel was just nineteen years and five months when he enlisted in August 1915. His army service ended on 3 February 1919 with two medals, two gas-burnt lungs and a shell wound in his back. He returned to Britain for treatment at a hospital in Coventry where medics did all they could to help him before discharging him to a convalescent home in Warwick.

Convalescing

Although it was clear to the doctors that the mild-mannered soldier was never going to fully recover, Lionel Turpin was eventually allowed to leave the convalescent home whereupon he attempted to find work locally. Lionel stood out in Warwick, for there were no other black people in the town, and he was regularly referred to as 'Sam', which was

an abbreviation for the more pejorative 'Sambo'.

Finding Love

He was equally exotic in nearby Leamington Spa, where the introverted West Indian veteran soon met a local [white] teenager named Beatrice Whitehouse. Beatrice came from a rough, but tight-knit, local working-class family, her father being known as a bare-knuckle prize-fighter." Lionel and Beatrice were married on 24 December 1921 and he worked as a master moulder at Bissel's Foundry. His son Jackie recalled: "My father put up with his war wounds best as he could but his health deteriorated fast."

The end

Lionel was eventually allocated a bed at the Ministry of Pensions Hospital in Birmingham, but on 6 March 1929 he passed away due to his war injuries. His funeral hearse was drawn by four black horses, with six soldiers as an escort. Lionel was buried in the Brunswick Street Cemetery, Leamington Spa and his funeral was paid for by the Leamington branch of the British Legion. His daughter says: "I think they should put my dad's name, and millions of others like him, on the Roll of Honour with those as lost their lives on the battlefields. All over the world, people died slow unofficial deaths in peacetime beds but it was the war that'd killed them."

Quotations taken from 'Battling Jack: You Gotta Fight Back' by Jackie Turpin and W. Terry Fox