

WALTER TULL

Footballer Hero



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Early Life

Walter Tull has become the most celebrated black British soldier of the First World War. Orphaned at the age of nine, Walter and his brother Edward, then aged eleven, were placed in the National Children's Home orphanage in Bethnal Green, London. Walter

served an apprenticeship as a printer, but it was as a footballer that he made his name. Transferring to Northampton Town in 1911, he played over 110 matches for them.

Recruitment

When Walter was recruited into the army in December 1914 he became the 55th member of the newly formed 17th (1st Football) Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment, popularly known as the "Football Battalion". This was the result of the Football Association and the War Office joining forces to tap into the game's popularity and using it to attract new recruits.

To The Front

Walter was rapidly promoted to non-commissioned ranks of Corporal and then Lance-Sergeant. At first, Walter faced weeks of inactivity and boredom. In a letter to his brother written in 1916, he described the weeks of waiting before being moved to the front as 'a monotonous life', saying 'most of the boys prefer the excitement of the trenches'. However, in later letters, he talked about the 'carnage' he witnessed on the front

line in a war he had come to hate. On a single day in 1916 around 19,000 men who went into battle with him were killed. Half of the Football Battalion were killed in action. In April 1916, after six months in France, Tull was diagnosed with 'acute mania' (shell shock), removed from the front line, and hospitalized.

Officer Training

In September 1916 he returned to action and was recommended for Officer training. It was virtually impossible for a man of African descent to be commissioned an officer but Walter Tull had special qualities that made him stand out from the crowd and he had demonstrated on many occasions that he could serve with distinction, including being decorated with the 1914-15 star. He is acknowledged as the first black Infantry Officer in the history of the British Army.

Time runs out

On 25 March 1918, during the second battle of the Somme, Walter Tull was killed while crossing No Man's Land near the hamlet of Favreuil, France. He was 29. His men tried to recover his body. Three times they ran into No Man's Land, but were forced back by enemy fire. His body was never recovered. Nicholas Bailey has described his character: "From what I gathered, looking into his life, he was a quiet and unassuming man, fiercely

intelligent, but physically imposing. He defied all the rules of his time. He never complained, he just let his deeds do the talking."

Remembering

Walter's name can be found on the massive Arras Memorial to the missing in northern France. The Memorial is just a few miles away from Favreuil near to where he was killed. Walter's name is one of 34,782 casualties from Britain, South Africa and New Zealand with no known grave who are on the Arras Memorial.