

WILLIAM ROBINSON CLARKE

First Black Pilot in the British Flying Corps



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Off to war

'Robbie' Clarke was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1895. *The Gleaner* reported on the young man's interest in automobiles, and his departure to England to support the war effort

Now and again Robbie sent accounts of his

exploits in France to *The Gleaner*. The following was published on 7 September 1917:

His experience

'Things were very hot when I was in France. Oh! The suffering the fellows have to bear. It is indescribable. I got my 'packet' over the Ypres front about five miles on the German side. I was photographing, and after taking the photos, was looking out for a nice place to give Fritz a couple of pills (bombs).

'We were so taken up looking for a good target, that we forgot to look out for enemy scouts. The first thing I knew was hearing the rat-a-tat-tat of his machine guns, and glancing back, saw about five of them diving for me, and I could not get away in time.

"I was hit almost at the start of the scrap. The machine was riddled. A very uncommon, though not unusual, thing happened just previously. One of our shells passed right between our planes. Both observer and myself heard it touch one of the wires. Thank goodness it did not touch the engine. When I was hit I was about 5,000 feet up.

“It was my second scrap and I fared worse than the first one. We are not quite sure, but we believe we did get one in the first scrap which took place a couple of days before, as we saw him go down as though he was hit.”

Remembrance

When Robbie died in 1981, A. S. Phillips, Professor of the University of the West Indies, paid tribute to him at his funeral and described some of his achievements: “I may say that Robbie Clarke’s exploits as a flyer may justly be termed legendary. I remember my awe and admiration when I discovered that he actually flew with the Royal Flying Corps, the predecessor of the Royal Air Force. The episode in 1917 in which Pilot Clarke while on an operational flight was attacked by German fighters in the air, and though severely wounded, nevertheless managed to fly his R.E.8 aeroplane back to a relatively safe crash-landing behind the allied lines, places him in that special category of the genuine war hero.”