## Contributions from the Caribbean: war service and settlement

Several thousand people from the Caribbean contributed to the Allied effort in the Second World War. The majority served in the RAF, in both ground and flight crew roles. Some men had trained with the Royal Canadian Airforce (RCAF) before coming to Britain. Of the men serving in the RAF and the RCAF, 103 were decorated.

Although the colour bar in the Army was relaxed during the war, the number of West Indians recruited for the Army never matched those for the Air Force. Men from the Caribbean were more likely to serve in the RAF than the Army or the Royal Navy.

Women from the Caribbean served in both the RAF and the Army but their numbers were small, 80 and 30 respectively. It has been said that the War Office was reluctant to recruit women from the Caribbean.

Thousands more Caribbean people served in the Merchant Navy bringing supplies to Britain from across the world. In 1940, 1,800 of these men had responded to an appeal from the Colonial Office to serve as crew for the cargo ships of the Merchant Navy. This work was dangerous, as the ships were subject to attack from enemy ships, submarines, aircraft and mines.

Men and women from the Caribbean also worked in civilian war industries in Great Britain during the Second World War. Seven hundred men came from British Honduras to work as lumberjacks in the forests of Scotland. Others worked in munitions production and as skilled tradesmen in essential manufacturing industries.

In the years immediately after the Second World War and beyond, many men and women from across the Caribbean migrated to Great Britain. The reasons were varied and the experiences also. For many it was the wartime experience that shaped their decision to move to the United Kingdom. Most of the passengers on the SS Empire Windrush, which docked in Tilbury in June 1948, were ex-servicemen seeking work.

**Case Study: Sam King, from War to Windrush**

When war broke out in September 1939 the colonies rallied to support the war effort. There were several reasons for this: loyalty to Great Britain, the mother country; adventure; to help the cause of independence or decolonisation.

For Sam King from Jamaica, motivation to serve was driven by the notion that the British Empire, despite its faults, was better than Nazi Germany, and, by his mother’s advice:

*‘My son, the mother country is at war. Go. And if you survive you will not regret it.’*

*(See Stephen Bourne (2012), The Motherland Calls: Britain’s Black Servicemen and Women 1939–4)*

Sam was the eldest son in a farming family. Aged 18 he was accepted into the Royal Air Force (RAF) and trained as an aircraft fitter. Jamaicans who had served overseas during the war were made to return home and Sam returned to Jamaica in 1947 after being demobbed from the RAF. On his return to Jamaica he decided that he would not raise a family in a place where people did not have control of their education, health and welfare, and so he returned to Britain in 1948.

*“I have been here during the war fighting Nazi Germany and I came back to help build Britain.”*

[*(See BBC History: Windrush Arrivals)*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/arrival_01.shtml#six)

Sam was one of 492 migrants from Jamaica who arrived at Tilbury Dock on 22 June 1948 on board SS Empire Windrush. The arrival of the Windrush is viewed as a seminal moment in post-war migration by men and women from the Caribbean.

Despite having served in the war and returning to help 'build Britain', Sam faced difficulties when trying to buy a house in Camberwell in South London, including hostility from the host nation and accommodation shortages. To help overcome these difficulties, Sam created a partnership-based house-buying scheme to assist those who would otherwise be subject to the whims of landlords. Sam eventually moved into local politics and went on to become the first black mayor of the London Borough of Southwark.

**Questions and student Activities**

* Why did more people from the Caribbean join the RAF rather than the other two branches of the British armed forces?
* What were the various motivations for men and women from the colonies and Dominions to join the British war effort?
* What was the impact of war service on migraton and settlement in Britain in the post-war years?