

James Waddell

James was an African-American member of an aviation engineer battalion, responsible for building airfields.

He was born in 1921, the son of a clergyman and worked 12-hour shifts delivering coal and making ice for a shop in Philadelphia before the war. In 1937 he was arrested for protesting for equal employment rights for African-Americans. When war broke out, James approached the Canadians to see if he could fly with the Royal Canadian Air Force as a gunner. He was concerned that he would be discriminated against in the US Army, and wanted to fight. Told to wait, he joined the American army in September 1942. He was posted to Britain as part of the 847th Engineer Aviation Battalion. In England he helped to build Debach and Eye airfields before he moved to Europe with the advancing armies.

Like most African-American soldiers, James had to overcome prejudice both at home and in the UK: 'I had a couple of run-ins in town. You'd be surprised the things [white troops] said about us. They had spread the lie that we had tails! Talk to other black soldiers, they'll say the same thing. Such vicious statements made about the same person who may one day, on the field of battle, save his life.'

Sadly, many stories like James's have been lost: very few African-Americans were interviewed about their experiences after the war. Ground units rarely organised reunions, as combat units did. James did not keep in touch with his fellow soldiers, seeing only one man again after the war. 'I've even forgotten his name. That was in 1952. I've not seen that person since.' James became a keen student of African-American history. When asked what he would like people to think when they viewed his recorded interview, he said: 'That black man on that film: he's an American. Don't call me white. Don't call me black. Call me James: American citizen.'



Evelyn Johnson

Evelyn was one of a small number of African-American women who served with US forces in the UK. She joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (later the Women's Army Corps, or WAC) in 1942, and served until 1945, ending her service as a Sergeant. Although trained as an orthopaedic medical clerk, Evelyn was posted to Britain as a mail handler in the 6888th Central Postal Battalion. Based in Birmingham, she worked sorting packages to clear a large backlog at the US mail depot. Her unit then moved to Rouen in France, to complete a similar task. Throughout her time in uniform, she experienced racism: 'We knew better than to do anything about that, because we could get court martialled. So we'd disregard it,' she said. 'You have to remember segregation was still in, and many of the white military were from the South. Many of us were not. Some were from



the South, some from the North, some from the West. But some of the Americans carried that segregation right over there.'