



## CROSSING THE WHITE LINE: THE WALTER TULL STORY

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Westminster Archives is proud to present the life story of Walter Tull, which would not have been possible without the £49,900 grant we received from the Heritage Lottery Fund. As an organisation we are committed to celebrating diversity and this funding has allowed us to bring the story of a Great Black Briton to the wider audience it deserves. We would also like to acknowledge the help of Tull biographer Phil Vasili. Without Phil's tireless years of research on the Tull story this project would not have been possible.

We extend our thanks and gratitude to Marilyn Stephenson-Knight from The Dover War Memorial Project, whose energy and enthusiasm helped bring the project to Folkestone, the Finlayson family for their generosity in allowing us to use their collection and a special thanks to all the staff who worked with us from NCH (National Children's Homes), The Methodist Central Hall, The National Army Museum, The National Football Museum, Glasgow Rangers, Crabble Corn Mill, students from CAPA and also to the PFA for supporting this project.

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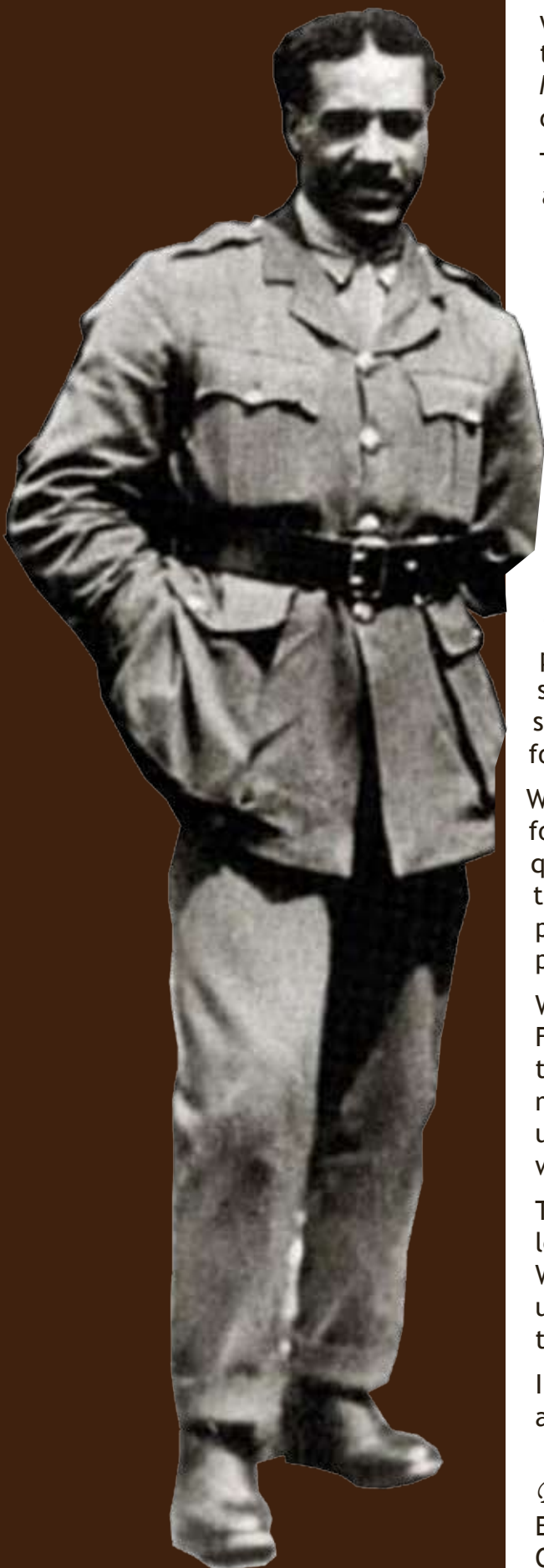
The learning activities featured in the Crossing the White Line: The Walter Tull Activity Pack may be duplicated for educational purposes only.



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## INTRODUCTION



Walter Tull was one of England's first black professional footballers and also the first black combat Officer in the British Army. Walter's story can be told thanks to a £49,900 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), which has been used by Westminster Archives to mark the 90th anniversary of his death on the Western Front. More details of the project are available from [www.crossingthewhiteline.com](http://www.crossingthewhiteline.com).

This story booklet is designed to be used to compliment a KS2 teaching pack based around *History Unit 20: What can we learn about recent history from studying about the life of a famous person? (Walter Tull)*. Both resources are available to download from [www.crossingthewhiteline.com](http://www.crossingthewhiteline.com).

Walter was born in Folkestone in April, 1888, to a father from Barbados and a mother from Folkestone, Kent. Sadly both his parents died by the time Walter was 9 years old and he was placed in a Methodist-run orphanage in Bethnal Green, East London. Walter was a keen footballer and in 1908 he was signed up for a local amateur side, Clapton FC. He was later spotted by Tottenham Hotspur and signed professionally in 1909. His performances were greatly applauded in the press, one newspaper commenting that he was in "a class superior to that shown by most of his colleagues." Walter subsequently left Spurs and played more than 100 matches for Northampton Town.

When the First World War broke out he abandoned the football pitch and joined the Football Battalion. He was quickly promoted to Sergeant and fought in the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Despite military regulations forbidding people of colour being commissioned as officers he was promoted to Lieutenant in 1917.

Walter led his men, at the Battle of Piave on the Italian Front, through extreme weather conditions and brought his troops back safely without a single casualty. Walter was mentioned in dispatches for his "gallantry and coolness under fire." He was recommended for a Military Cross, which he never received.

Tragically, at the age of 29, Walter met his death trying to lead his men to safety whilst under German attack on the Western Front in March, 1918. Several of his men made unsuccessful attempts to bring him back to the British trenches and his body was never recovered.

I am confident that Walter's story will inspire children and adults for generations to come.

*Peter Daniel*  
Education and Interpretation Officer  
City of Westminster Archives

# 1918

## Soldier

Tull could see the Germans had broken through,  
So in retreat he led his frightened men,  
Who realised their chances now were few,  
Of getting back to their own lines again.

As shells and bullets screamed their mean intent,  
Walter's life seemed to flash before his eyes,  
A grand drama began in Folkestone, Kent,  
Takes one more final curtain here and dies.



On March 21st, 1918, the Germans made one last desperate effort to win World War One. Walter Tull was a 29 year old 2nd Lieutenant in the Football Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment when he found himself in the British trenches at Favreuil facing the Germans as they advanced.

Walter Tull in his Officer uniform.  
*Phil Vasili*

Soldiers heading into 'no man's land'.  
*National Army Museum*



# 1918

# Soldier

As lines of bullets zipped above his head,  
He hoped and prayed that they would pass him by,  
But from amongst that deadly shower of lead,  
A shot struck him and passed out near his eye.

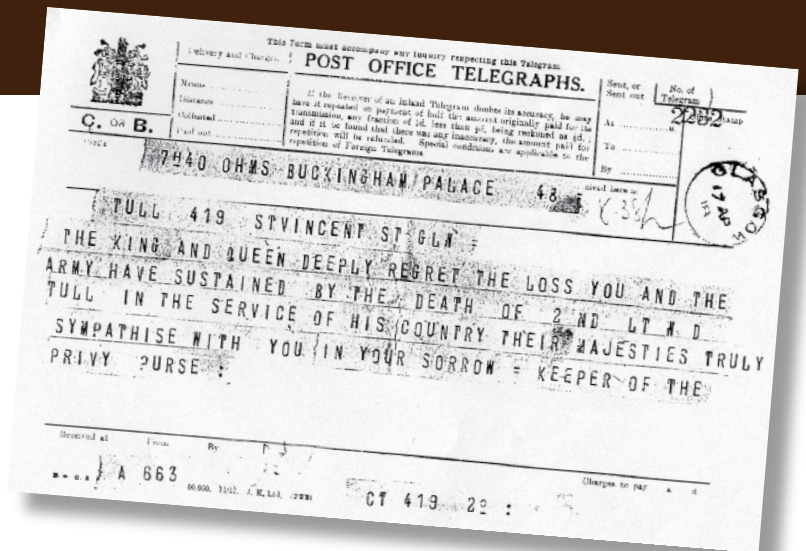
As the thunder of the guns died in dark,  
He felt his mind begin to drift away,  
To a painful time which had left its mark,  
His father's death, a sad and tragic day

On the 25th March, 1918, Walter was hit by machine gun fire as he tried to lead his men in retreat before the German advance. Former Leicester goalkeeper Private Tom Billingham stayed with Walter in the two minutes it took for him to die. Billingham did his best to recover Walter's body but had to leave him as the Germans advanced. Walter's body was never found and he is one of thousands of soldiers from World War One who have no known grave.

### How Lieut. Tull Died.

In a chat with Pte. T. Billingham, the Leicester goalkeeper the other day, he told me that Lieut. Walter Tull, of the Footballers' Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment, whose death was such a blow to his many friends, was killed by a machine gun bullet which entered his neck and came out just below his right eye. Billingham was about 30 yards from him when he was hit, and was the first to go to his assistance. He only lived two minutes, however, and Billingham carried him some distance in the hope of securing for him a decent burial, but had to leave him on account of the Germans' rapid advance. Tull, he adds, will be greatly missed. He was a thorough gentleman and was beloved by all.

Northampton Independent Newspaper article describing how Walter died. *Phil Vasili*



Telegram sent to Walter's brother, Edward, consoling him after Walter's death. *National Archives*



Germans advancing toward British lines in March, 1918. *National Army Museum*

# 1888-97 *childhood*

He saw his arms around his brother wound,  
On a cold, wintry scene from long ago,  
As father's coffin slid beneath the ground,  
To Bethnal Green they knew they had to go.

And then himself a boy at Bonner Road,  
Dressed in the colours of their football team,  
His reddened eyes the signs of tears they showed,  
As Glasgow bound his brother left the scene.

**W**alter Tull was born in Folkestone, Kent, on April 28th 1888. He was the grandson of a slave, son of a Bajan carpenter, and born to a white English mother. When Walter was 7 years old his mother, Alice, passed away; two years later his father, Daniel, also died, leaving behind six children for Walters's stepmother, Clara, to look after. Overwhelmed and unable to support them, she sent Walter and his brother, Edward, to live in a Methodist orphanage in Bonner Road, Bethnal Green, East London. Edward was adopted two years later by a dentist and his wife from Glasgow. Edward's move to Glasgow meant Walter was left without any family. He joined the orphanage football team, which helped him cope with his loneliness.

The Tull family.  
*Phil Vasili*



Dr Stephenson, founder of  
Bonner Road Orphanage.  
*NCH*



Walter sits in the front row of the  
orphanage football team. *Phil Vasili*



# 1909

# Footballer

Once more he held Clapton's Amateur Cup,  
 Their six goal win had been his final game,  
 For the grand sum of ten pounds he'd signed up,  
 For mighty Spurs in search of football fame.

South America in nineteen hundred and nine,  
 Helped him gain the respect of all at Spurs,  
 Prepared him to cross over the white line,  
 To face up to every challenge that occurs.



Walter in his Spurs kit. *Phil Vasili*

While training to be a printer at the orphanage, Walter won a trial with Clapton F.C. and was in the first team in less than 3 months! During the 1908-1909 season he helped lead Clapton to the Amateur Cup, the London Senior Cup and the London County Amateur Cup titles. Walter was quickly noticed by larger clubs and in 1909 he signed up with Tottenham Hotspur, making him only the second black professional footballer in the English top division and the first outfield player. He played for the north London side during their tour of Argentina prior to the 1909-10 season and made his debut at age 21 against Sunderland in September, 1909.



Action picture of Clapton Orient at the time when Walter Tull played for them. *Football Star, Phil Vasili*



Tottenham Hotspur in 1911. Walter sits at the far right. *Phil Vasili*



*Ted Smith-Orr*

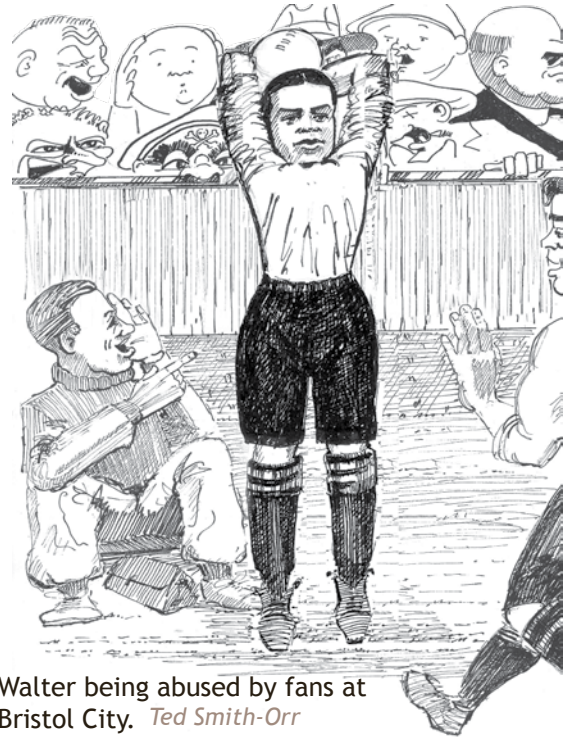
# 1909

## Footballer

THE FIRST BLACK PLAYER SINCE ARTHUR WHARTON,  
'TULL'S PASSING SKILLS PLAY SUCH A CRUCIAL ROLE,'  
Some headlines praised but some would report on,  
His Spurs games using names like 'Darkie' Tull.

When it all went wrong down at Bristol City,  
Where the crowd screamed out their names of racial hate,  
He'd needed Spurs support, not their pity,  
But what they did was hard to contemplate.

Arthur Wharton, a goal keeper from Ghana, was the first black professional player in England. He had been a star with Preston North End and Sheffield United 20 years before Walter made his debut. It was not surprising then that Walter stood out from the other Spurs players. Casual racism was the norm at the time, with match reports referring to Walter as 'darkie' but things got out of hand in a game at Bristol in October of 1909. *The Football Star* described the Bristol City fans racist language as, 'lower than Billingsgate'. Another paper reported 'a cowardly attack on him' by a section of the Bristol City support. A furious reporter wrote; 'Let me tell those Bristol hooligans that Tull is so clean in his mind and method as to be a model for all white men who play football.'



Walter being abused by fans at Bristol City. *Ted Smith-Orr*



Arthur Wharton, England's first black professional football player, 1888.  
*Phil Vasili*

Walter being tackled by Charlie Roberts during the 1909 Spurs v Manchester Utd game at White Hart Lane.  
*Football Star, Phil Vasili*



# 1911

## Footballer

Instead of helping him when he was down,  
They'd made him leave and join a smaller club,  
A lower league side called Northampton Town,  
From Spurs this seemed like such an awful snub.

It'd felt like that first day at Bonner Road,  
But Boss Chapman had loved him like a son,  
And through his skill upon the pitch he showed,  
That those thugs who had abused him had not won.

The incident at Bristol embarrassed Spurs who dropped Walter to the sidelines and the reserve side. Tottenham made no attempt to confront the racism that existed at the time and he rarely made first team appearances following that terrible day in Bristol. However, his long, tough years at the orphanage taught him how to behave when others tried to put him down. In 1911 Walter was sold for 'a heavy transfer fee' to Northampton Town. Their manager, Herbert Chapman, was later to become one of the greatest managers ever at Arsenal F.C. Chapman was a Methodist like Walter and had once played for Arthur Wharton at Stalybridge. He did not see Walter's colour, only his skills as a player. Walter played in 110 first team matches for the side and was arguably their biggest star. Walter and Chapman certainly proved Spurs wrong.

Walter Tull  
cigarette card.  
*Dover War Memorial  
Project*



Herbert Chapman,  
manager of Northampton  
Town. *Phil Vasili*



Northampton Town  
F.C. Walter sits in  
the front row, far  
right. *Phil Vasili*

Walter signs for  
Northampton Town.  
*Ted Smith-Orr*



# 1914

# Soldier

Rangers had just offered a bright future,  
When he'd opted to 'PLAY THE GREATER GAME.'  
War put football in a different picture,  
Playing on would have only offered shame.

He'd signed up as a Footy Volunteer,  
And joined the likes of Vivian Woodward,  
He'd wanted to prove that he had no fear,  
Of fighting as an English soldier should.



Vivian Woodward.  
National Football Museum

Walter was close to a deal that would send him to Glasgow to play for Rangers when war broke out. He was on the brink of living close to his brother Edward again when the world changed forever. On the 21 December 1914, Walter volunteered for the Football Battalion; he viewed enlisting as his responsibility and duty to his country in a time of great crisis. He joined other great footballers of the time in the military, including Vivian Woodward who played for Tottenham, Chelsea and England. Walter's last football match was in the autumn of 1915, by November he was in France. Walter was sent to Les Ciseaux, a tiny town he had never heard of before. He was close to the front lines, so close that he heard the great guns booming in the distance as he lay in bed at night.



Recruitment posters for the Football Battalion. National Army Museum

Attestation Form. National Archives

## Footballers to Play the Greater Game



# 1916

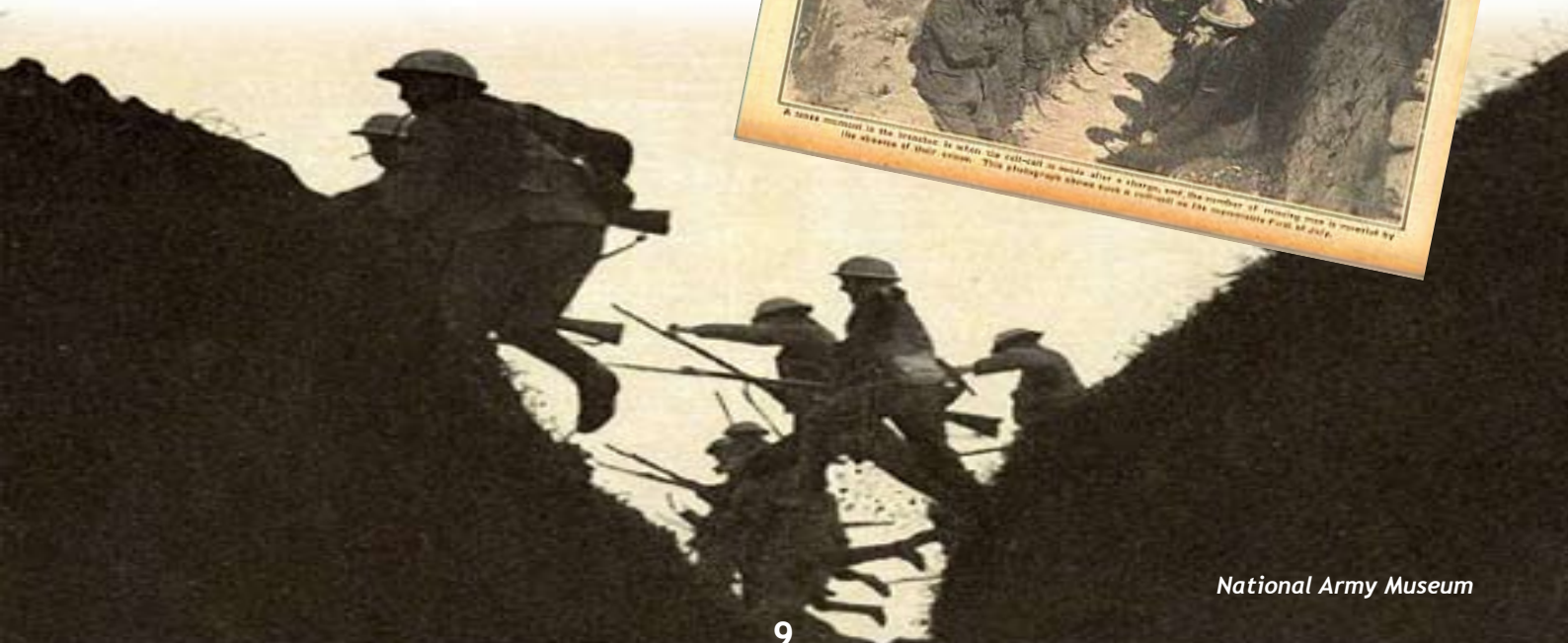
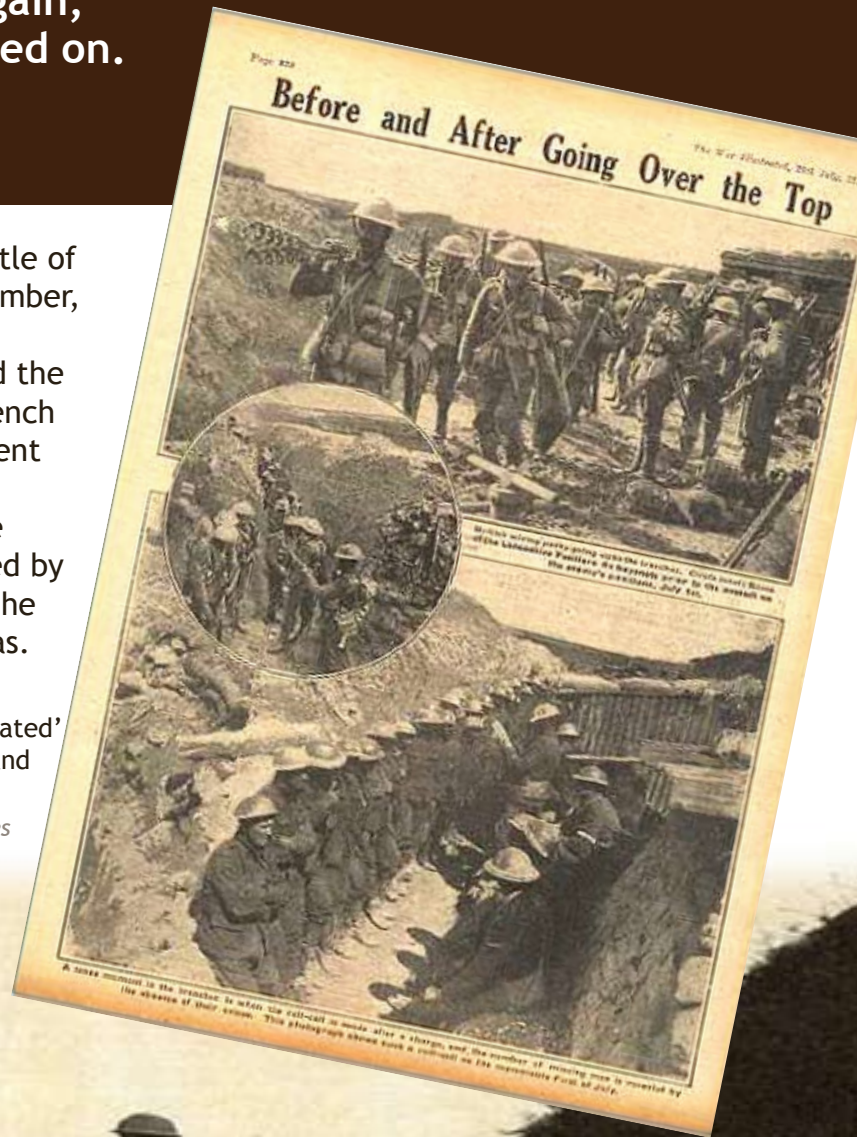
# Soldier

The Somme he'd somehow managed to survive,  
As his mates fell one after another.  
Shell shocked and so lucky to be alive,  
He'd been sent to England to recover.

He'd been a Sergeant, one of the lads, when  
Returned to France he'd found that they'd all gone,  
He'd felt like an orphan once again,  
But still did his duty and soldiered on.

Walter saw combat at the end of the Battle of the Somme between October and November, 1916. This battle saw some 420,000 British troops killed in a 4 month span. He survived the ferocious trench warfare only to develop trench foot and shell shock, resulting in his being sent back to England to recover. Walter regained his fitness and returned to France, where he discovered that his mates had been scattered by the war. Once again Walter was alone until he was given leave to return home for Christmas.

Pictures from 'War Illustrated' showing soldiers before and after going over the top.  
City of Westminster Archives



# 1917

# Soldier

What his orders told him broke every rule,  
'TULL TO REPORT TO THE GAILES O.T.C.'  
'Back then the Army's rules said in battle'  
Black officers should surely never be.

As the first black Briton to lead in war,  
He'd made history fighting in Italy.  
Why he'd won no medal he wasn't sure,  
As he'd once been listed for an M.C.

As Walter was preparing to return to the frontlines in France, he was surprised to discover that his orders were to go to Scotland instead. Tull's superior officers had been so impressed with him that they had recommended him to be sent to the Officer Training Corps in Gales, Scotland. This was despite military regulations forbidding those who were not of 'pure European descent' from becoming Officers. Tull received his commission as an Officer in May, 1917, in spite of the fact that it was technically illegal.

2nd Lieutenant Walter Tull was sent to the Italian Front and became the first black Officer in the British Army to lead troops into battle. He led his men at the Battle of Piave and was mentioned in dispatches for his 'gallantry and coolness' under fire. He twice led his unit across the River Piave on a raid and both times brought all of his troops back safely with out a single casualty. Major General Sir Sydney Lawford, his Commanding Officer, sent back a report about the battle that singled Walter out for outstanding courage and leadership abilities. He was recommended for the Military Cross but never received it, possibly because it would have embarrassed the army awarding medals to a black officer.

2nd Lieutenant Tull, stands alongside his comrades at Gales Officer Training Corps. Walter Tull didn't smoke or drink alcohol.

Phil Vasili

10

Headline during the time Walter was in Italy.  
*New York Times*

**BRITISH ARE ACTIVE  
ON THE PIAVE FRONT**  
Patrols Cross the River and  
Artillery Shells Austro-  
German Bases.  
**GUN DUELS INTENSIFIED**  
Italians Bombard Enemy Trans-  
ports and Moving Columns  
on the Asiago Plateau.

"I wish to place on record my appreciation of your gallantry and coolness. You were one of the first to cross the river prior to the raid, and during the raid you took the covering party of the main body across and brought them back without a casualty inspite of heavy fire." *Sir Sydney Lawford, commanding officer*

Quoted from Sir Sydney Lawford in the Northampton Independent, March 16th, 1918.



# 1918

# Soldier

Now here he was in France about to die,  
Returned back to the Somme to meet his fate,  
A pale gold ball above him in the sky,  
Perhaps they played the game at heaven's gate.

Just at the moment Tull, our hero, died,  
The sun's bright rays broke through the gloom to shine,  
As Private Billingham knelt down and cried,  
Walter crossed that white line one final time.

After their time in Italy, Walter's battalion was transferred to the terrible Somme Valley in France. On 25th March, 1918, 2nd Lieutenant Tull was trying to help his men escape the German advance at Favreuil when he was killed by machine gun fire, his body was never recovered. Several of his men attempted to retrieve his body under heavy fire but were unsuccessful. Their brave actions are a testament to Walter Tull's character and leadership qualities.

23<sup>rd</sup> Middlesex Regt  
17 April 1918.

Dear Sir,

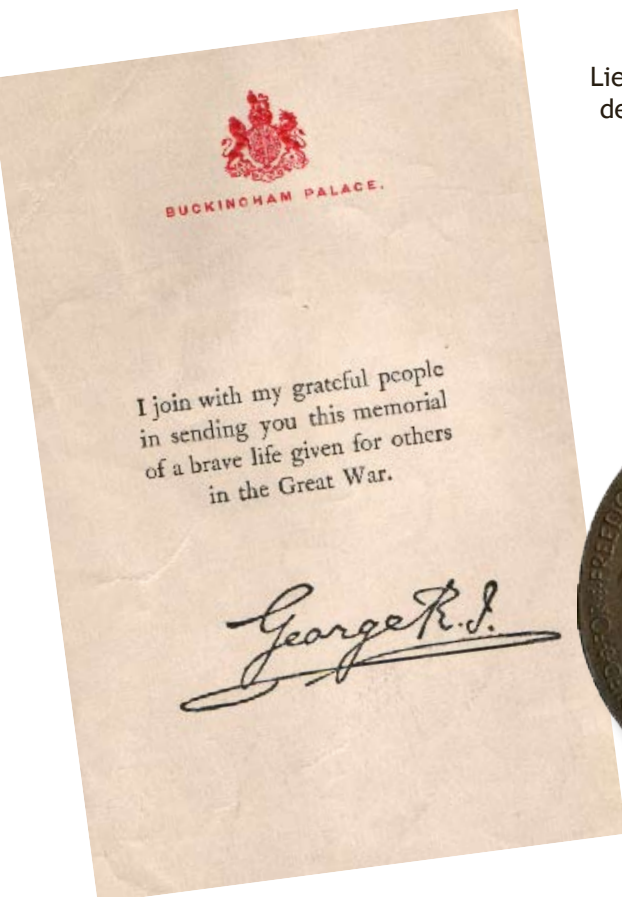
Of course you have already heard of the death of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieut. Walter Tull on March 25<sup>th</sup> last.

Being at present in command of 'B' Co. - (the Captain was wounded) - allow me to say how popular he was throughout the Battalion. He was brave & conscientious; he had been recommended for the Military Cross, & had certainly earned it; the Commanding Officer had every confidence in him, & he was liked by the men.

— you know his motto was 'Pro patria'; the Battalion & Company have lost a faithful Officer; personally I have lost a friend. Can I say more! except that I hope that those who remain may be as true & faithful as he.

Yours sincerely  
Lt. Pickard

Letter from 2nd Lieutenant Pickard, describing his loss.  
Phil Vasili



Walter's brother, Edward, would have received a letter and memorial plaque from the King, which was given to relatives who had lost a family member in the Great War.

City of Westminster Archives

# 1918 Soldier

**“Now I am a soldier with no known grave,  
Dear Eddie, Do they still remember me?  
I was orphan, footballer, soldier...  
The first black combat officer.”**

**“Walter, your name will live for evermore.”**

‘Walter Tull ridiculed the barriers of ignorance that tried to deny people of colour equality... His life stands testament to a determination to confront those people.’ *Phil Vasili*



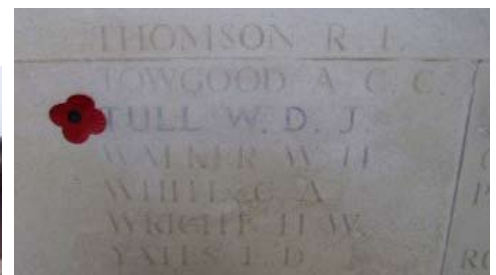
2nd Lieutenant Tull stands behind his sister, Cecillia. His brother, Edward stands behind a lady, possibly Edward’s adopted mother.

*Phil Vasili*



Today Walter Tull is remembered by his former club, Northampton Town, with a memorial outside of Sixfields Stadium.

*Phil Vasili*



Walter’s name appears on the Arras Memorial in France.

*Phil Vasili*





**WALTER DANIEL JOHN TULL**  
April 28, 1888 - March 25, 1918

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