

# St. Lucia and World War II

Not many St. Lucians, or West Indians for that matter, are aware of the important role played by St. Lucia in winning World War II. When Germany declared war on Poland on September 1, 1939, Britain responded in defense of Poland and declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939. As in World War I, patriotic West Indians rallied to the defense of Britain, which they had been taught was the mother country.

However, the 1930s had been tumultuous throughout the British West Indies as islanders sought great political and economic rights. In essence, workers and farmers desired better pay, better living conditions, and the right to govern their affairs. Uprisings in various islands had led to the formation of the Moyne Commission to investigate the causes of the unrest in the British West Indies and to make recommendations to improve living conditions. That surge led to the 1932 West Indian Conference held at Roseau, Dominica where the call went out for the formation of a British West Indian federal government, run by a legislature elected under a universal adult suffrage system.

That surge for democracy clashed with the fascist philosophy of Adolf Hitler which was based on racial supremacy of white over black, and world conquest by Germany over the so-called inferior races. That fact gave greater impetus to West Indians to enlist in the fight against fascism. In that effort over 7,000 West Indians served in the Royal Air Force, and about 16,000 served in the British Army. Many were St. Lucians, some of whom gave their lives, such as: Royal Air Force Flying Officer Hugh Terrence Etienne; David Shingleton-Smith, of the Royal Air Force Reserve; Flight Sergeant Henry Eugene Middleton Dulieu, a Flight Navigator with the Royal Air Force Reserve; and Denis Claude Desmond DuBoulay, a Pilot Officer and Air Gunner with the Royal Canadian Air Force, who died at age 20.

The West Indians in the Royal Air Force saw the most action, with about 103 being honored with the Distinguished Flying Cross. In St. Lucia the British Army established its base at Vigie Barracks; with the US Army Air Force and US Army being based at Beane Army Air Field (Now Hewanorra International Airport) and Vieux Fort, respectively. During the Second World War, Vieux Fort became a base for American troops. Some of the evidence can still be seen around town, such as the underground tunnel that runs from Clark Street all the way to St. Judes Hospital in Augier. This tunnel was used for storage of supplies and also a quick route to the hospital. Many people who reside in Vieux-Fort today have no idea about such a tunnel.

Wendell Christian of Dominica who joined the British Army at Vigie Barracks in 1943 recalls that, “most of our food and supplies came from the US base at Vieux Fort; and we used the US Thompson submachine gun, along with Willy’s Jeep, Studebaker and Chevrolet trucks to ferry our troops and supplies around St. Lucia. We were on the lookout for the German submarines and patrolled all the beaches and potential landing zones. Prior to the base we knew the Germans would come to undefended areas to seek resupplies of water and fruit, as they were far from their home bases. They were also being helped by the Vichy regime in Martinique and Guadeloupe which – after the fall of France in 1940 -collaborated with Hitler.”

Activated on September 28, 1941, Beane Field Army Air Field at St. Lucia hosted the 5th Bombardment Squadron which flew B-18 “Bolo” bombers. Those bombers flew anti-submarine patrols to sink marauding German U-Boats which had played havoc with allied shipping. During the war 445 ships of Allied nations were sunk in the Battle of the Caribbean and Atlantic. St. Lucia was not spared in that battle; the *Lady Nelson* and the *Umtata* having been torpedoed and sunk in Castries harbor by German submarine U-161 on the night of March 10, 1942 with much loss of life. It was for that reason the British Army’s South Caribbean Forces were embodied to secure the islands and the vital sea lanes upon which the Allied war effort depended. With a third of all fuel used by the British in World II coming from Trinidad, Venezuela and Aruba – and with the Panama Canal being vital to the shipment of war materiel - the bases in St. Lucia were critical to the Allied victory in 1945. With victory came an expansion of democracy in the Caribbean, and the eventual independence of the islands of the former British West Indies.

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