

There has been some fascinating discussions recently amongst historians about the extent of the 'Colour bar' that existed in the British Army at the time of Tull's promotion to the rank of Second Lieutenant:

John Simkin, creator of [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk) wrote recently that,

According to several accounts on Walter Tull it has been claimed that despite military regulations forbidding "any negro or person of colour" being an officer, Tull received his commission in May, 1917.

I have had an email from the British Army legal department pointing out: This was not the case. The only prohibition was against 'an alien' enjoying 'any office or place of trust' (Act of Settlement Sec. 3), although they could hold honorary rank in the British Army, whether or not accompanied by a formal commission. Aliens could enlist in the British Army, see s. 95 (2) of the Manual of Military Law of 1914:

'any inhabitant of any British protectorate and any negro or person of colour, ALTHOUGH AN ALIEN [my stress], may voluntarily enlist in pursuance of this Part of this Act...' (i.e. the Army Act)

But the point is that Tull was born in Folkestone of a father from Barbados and a mother from Kent, and was therefore not an alien but a British citizen, and as such perfectly entitled to hold a normal active commission. It makes a good story to say that the rules had to be broken to make him an officer, but it isn't true. It is quite enough of a tribute that he rose from 'ranker' to officer in 2 years.

Phil Vasili, the author of *Colouring over the White Line: the History of Black Footballers in Britain* responded,

The argument that (the army) are inferring is that Black British recruits did not face any unique difficulties in enlisting, which is contradicted by numerous personal accounts of soldiers of colour from the First World War. It is also contradicted by records held at Kew which detail the debates that Black enlistment ignited among civil servants and politicians. It is further contradicted by fact: if Blacks were freely entitled to join the army, and had done so, why was Tull the first Black infantry officer; and why was there not another until Moody in the Second World War?

The section of the Manual quoted is unclear because it implies 'Negroes' are aliens and goes on to say that an alien may not 'exercise any actual command or power'. This allowed the army to get around the fact of medical officers of colour. I am still ABSOLUTELY convinced they had a colour bar against Black infantry officers. The facts speak for themselves.

Lastly, why wasn't Tull given his Military Cross? Because he didn't deserve it? Or because, as an alien, he shouldn't have been 'exercising any actual command or power'?

Vasili went on to further state that

Tull was appointed to the Special Reserve of Officers. This is what their regulations in the *Short Guide to Obtaining a Commission in the Special Reserve of Officers*, published by His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1912, stated:

[to qualify for a commission] *a candidate must be of pure European descent, and a British born or naturalised British subject.*

*The Manual of Military Law* (1914) authorised *alien* soldiers, including *any negro or person of colour* to hold *honorary rank* but they must not *exercise any actual command or power*.<sup>[i]</sup> This rule created a contradiction because the *British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1914* affirmed the status of all those born within the British Empire as *natural born British subjects*.<sup>[ii]</sup> The act gave all peoples of Empire equivalent legal status to those born within the UK. However, if there was ambiguity as to the ethnic criteria needed to become an officer, this was spelled out on page 198 of the *Manual*, confirming the regulation contained in the *Short Guide* of 1912, governing the Special Reserve of Officers (to which Tull was appointed to a commission in 1917):

*Commissions in the Special Reserve of Officers are given to qualified candidates who are natural born or naturalised British subjects of pure European descent.*<sup>[iii]</sup>

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<sup>[i]</sup> *Manual of Military Law*, 1914, p.471.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Richard Smith in *The Oxford Companion to Black British History*, David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones (eds) (Oxford University Press, 2007) p.176

<sup>[iii]</sup> The *Manual* (1914) defines the Special Reserve of Officers as *a branch of the Reserve of Officers...designed to ensure that all units, services and departments of the regular forces shall be complete in officers on mobilization; to make good wastage which will occur in the regular forces in war, and to provide officers for special reserve units.* p198. Immediately underneath is the paragraph which states all officers must be of pure European descent.

The key phrase is *pure European descent*. There is no ambiguity here.