

EUROFILE HISTORY



Wilson Monk (third from left) with fellow GI's
Photo: Courtesy of Wilson Monk

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negative reaction from voters over what would be regarded as a distinctly 'un-British' policy, rejected US Army requests that the men be formally segregated from the white population.

They were also concerned about alienating Commonwealth troops if they began to treat black soldiers as second class citizens. However, in an attempt to appease white American troops, civil servants introduced a de-facto policy of separation, designed to encourage British civilians and soldiers not to fraternise with the black GIs.

It was widely ignored by locals, however. Black GIs were considered by many to behave with more courtesy and dignity than some brash white GIs, who openly mocked Britain's old-fashioned cars, bad food and even its bad plumbing, and who soon earned the enduring sobriquet: "overpaid, overfed, oversexed and over here".

British women noted that, in contrast to the white GIs, the black soldiers did not cat-call them – something that back home could have seen them lynched.

George Orwell wrote in *Tribune* at the time: "The general consensus of opinion seems to be that the only American soldiers with decent manners are the Negroes."

The presence of so many black troops on British soil had a lasting legacy in a country that was soon to see an influx of Afro-Caribbean migrants, starting with the arrival of the Windrush ship at Tilbury, in 1948.

There were numerous cases of mixed-race children born to white women, as a result of affairs with black soldiers. Many of those 'brown babies' only came to know their fathers in later years, with some of their descendants now embarking on a search for their American grandfathers.

The treatment the black GIs received in Britain is also thought to have had a significant impact on post-war America. "In Britain America's black soldiers were welcomed and treated with respect and kindness. Once they returned home,

there was no going back," Hervieux told me.

"Equitable treatment abroad helped fuel the budding civil rights movement that would rock America in the coming decades."

Some of these men's families are still fighting for their rights, such as the widow of Waverly Woodson, who was stationed in the Oxfordshire village of Checkendon, where he happily danced with the town postmistress and befriended her RAF husband.

With the help of her local senator in Maryland, Joann Woodson is campaigning for her late husband – a combat medic who fought to save wounded and dying American troops, black and white, on Omaha beach – to receive a Medal of Honor. Not one of the hundreds of thousands of Afro-Americans who served during the Second World War received the decoration at the time. It wasn't until 1997 that just seven black veterans from the conflict were presented with the medal by President Clinton.

Three quarters of a century on there aren't many of those veterans left, but their influence is still felt in the lives of mixed race children they left behind and in the memory of the white families who offered them a simple welcome. Hervieux believes that the story of the black GIs and the welcome they received in wartime Britain still has relevance today.

"The issue of race relations in the UK has not gone away, with Brexit still an open question and anti-immigrant sentiment rising as the world tilts to the right," she said. "We've lost most of the men I interviewed and there are now only three left. Losing them is losing a link to a time when Britons did the right thing for men of colour, a record that would soon be sullied with the hostility directed at black colonial immigrants arriving after the war."

Perhaps, as we honour the men who came here to help us in the fight for liberty – regardless of differences in race – it is a lesson Britons ought to remember.

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THE MYSTERIOUS ORIGINS OF GIRLS AND BOYS

While the ancient roots of the terms 'son' and 'daughter' have been well-established, the source of the more modern 'girl' and 'boy' remains cloudier.

PETER TRUDGILL suggests a reason why



Some categories of words seem to be much more stable over the centuries than others. The Germanic words for female and male offspring, *daughter* and *son*, have hardly changed over two millennia.

English *daughter* corresponds to Scots, Frisian and Dutch *dochter*, German *Tochter*, Danish and Norwegian *datter*, Swedish *dotter*, Norwegian *dåttir*, Faroese and Icelandic *dóttir*.

Similarly, the equivalents of English *son* are Frisian *soan*, Dutch *zoon*, German *Sohn*, Danish *son*, Norwegian *sonn*, Swedish *son*, and Faroese and Icelandic *sonur*. Philologists agree that these words go back to ancient Germanic *duhter* and *sunuz*; and in fact they go back even further – something like 6,000 years – to ancient Indo-European *dhugheter* and *suhnu*.

Compare this with the numerous changes which have happened to our everyday words for young people generally. In English, the most common word for a young female human being is *girl*. But in the north of Britain *lass* and *lassie* are extremely common; and until relatively recently the East Anglian word was *mauther*, with *maid* and *wench* being normal in different parts of western England.

The Frisian word for girl is *famke*, the Norwegian is *jente*, the Danish is *pige*, the Swedish *flicka*, and the Icelandic *stelpa*. The Faroese *genta* does show a resemblance to the Norwegian; and we can see a relationship between *maid*, German *Mädchen*, and Dutch *meisje*; but the variation is considerable compared to *daughter*.

The English word *girl* itself is rather tricky in other ways also. It didn't appear in English until about 1300, when it seems to have referred to both males and females. And nobody knows for sure where the word came from. Some experts think there may have been an Old English word *gyrela* meaning 'dress', in which case *girl* may represent a jocular usage, rather like the slang form *skiri* for 'girl'. Others believe it was a late mediaeval borrowing from Low German

gōr, 'small child': there's a modern German word *Göre* which means 'cheeky little girl' – but then there's the problem of where did the *l* come from?

There has also been some ideological discussion in recent decades in the English-speaking world about the usage of *girl* to refer to adults, the argument being that it's demeaning to refer to people over the age of majority by using a word for a child. In fact, the normal meaning of *girl* in most contexts in modern English, as the Oxford English Dictionary says, is precisely that of 'a young or relatively young woman'.

A female child would most normally be referred to as a 'little girl', and a young teenager as a 'young girl'. Most native English speakers, if told that a woman was coming to see them, would be rather surprised if, when she arrived, she turned out to be 18.

The English word *boy* shows an almost equally varied set of correspondences: *dreng* in Danish, *gutt* in Norwegian, *pojke* in Swedish, *strákur* in Icelandic – though admittedly Dutch *jongen*, Frisian *jonge* and German *Junge* present a more united front.

The word *boy*, too, is mysterious; no one is very sure where it came from. Like *girl*, it arrived in English around 1300. Its original meaning was 'male servant', reminding us of French *garçon* meaning 'boy' but also 'waiter'. Danish *dreng* also used to mean 'servant'.

There is a suggestion that *boy* came from Anglo-Norman *emboyé*, 'in chains', from Latin *bola*, 'leg iron', hence 'slave, servant'. But it could have been borrowed from Frisian, Dutch, or Low German. Nobody really knows.

So, while we are entirely sure about the origins of words like *daughter* which are thousands of years old, we are not at all sure about a couple of words which arrived only 600 years ago.

Why is this? Maybe words for boys and girls vary and change more than others because they so often originate in colloquial or humorous nicknames and endearments.

KID

The original meaning of *kid* was 'a young goat'. It came into English from Old Norse. The related German *Kitz* most often means 'fawn' but can also be 'young goat'. *Kid* started being used as a jocular word for a child in the 16th century, and became established as a common and increasingly less informal word during the 1800s.