

Peter Hulme

## Lancashire's Unknown Black Soldiers



Initially, the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment mostly recruited in Preston, Chorley, Bolton, and Wigan. This picture shows what it looked like around the beginning of the First World War: needless to say, impeccably white.



There'd been a long debate within the British Army about the role that colonial troops should play. 'Not in combat roles, and certainly not in Europe' had been the mantra. The Army was initially opposed to having *black* soldiers at all, but by early 1918 it was desperately short of men. West Indies Regiments were recruited and involved in combat, though not in Europe. Finally the Army decided to recruit among the large number of British citizens – most of them (despite this poster) black West Indians – who were living on the east coast of the USA.

The British Army set up recruiting offices in several cities, including one in New York on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, right next to the New York Public Library, and they opened the recruiting campaign by sending across the Atlantic one of the new-fangled tanks, yet to be used in combat, which rolled up and down Fifth Avenue.

By this stage of the war, the Army was not too particular about who it signed up.



One of the first recruits in New York was a young Nicaraguan poet called Salomón de la Selva. He was assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion of the Loyal North Lancs, a reserve unit based at Felixstowe as part of the Harwich Defences.

Although he probably didn't know it, Salomón de la Selva himself had Lancastiran ancestry. After Central America became independent in the early nineteenth century, British businesses established themselves in

the region and a young man called Jonas Glenton, from Liverpool, was one of a group of four Englishmen who dominated the Pacific-coast trade in the mid-nineteenth century. He married a Nicaraguan woman and settled in the country. Their daughter Teresa married a prominent lawyer called Selva: Salomón was their grandson, born in León in the north-east of the country, in 1893. Jonas Glenton was the eldest brother of Richard Glenton, the first inhabitant of 62 Falkner Street, Liverpool, the house that features in the first series of David Olusoga's *A House Through Time*.

In December 1918, shortly after the war had ended, De la Selva sent this postcard



to a Jamaican friend of his in New York. The photograph on the postcard was probably taken that month. There are hundreds of thousands of these First World War RPPCs (Real Photographic Postcards) in existence. The images were usually printed by hand directly from a negative onto photographic card with a 'postcard' back; and their popularity kept small photographic studios in business during the war. In most cases the print run would be half a dozen, made for an individual to send to his family. This one would have been good business for the Pier Studio in Felixstowe if each of the 36 soldiers pictured took a few, although I don't know of any other copies that have survived.

LIST OF MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED STATES

ALL ALIENS, whether in part of naturalized United States from a foreign port or a part of the United States, and all alien passengers from a foreign port of naturalized United States, shall file with the collector of customs at the port of arrival a card in the form of a

Passengers sailing from SAINT PETERSBURG RUSSIA 1918

CLASS	NAME IN FULL	Sex	Age	Color	Place of Birth	Last permanent address	Date of arrival	Date of departure	Name of vessel	Port of origin	Destination	Remarks	Signature	Official
1	De la Selva, Jonas	M	24	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
2	De la Selva, Teresa	F	18	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
3	De la Selva, Richard	M	22	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
4	De la Selva, Salomon	M	20	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
5	De la Selva, John	M	18	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
6	De la Selva, William	M	16	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
7	De la Selva, James	M	14	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
8	De la Selva, George	M	12	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
9	De la Selva, Edward	M	10	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
10	De la Selva, Charles	M	8	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
11	De la Selva, Thomas	M	6	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
12	De la Selva, Robert	M	4	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
13	De la Selva, Henry	M	2	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
14	De la Selva, Frederick	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
15	De la Selva, William	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
16	De la Selva, James	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
17	De la Selva, George	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
18	De la Selva, Edward	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
19	De la Selva, Charles	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
20	De la Selva, Thomas	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
21	De la Selva, Robert	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
22	De la Selva, Henry	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
23	De la Selva, Frederick	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
24	De la Selva, William	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
25	De la Selva, James	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
26	De la Selva, George	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
27	De la Selva, Edward	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
28	De la Selva, Charles	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
29	De la Selva, Thomas	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
30	De la Selva, Robert	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
31	De la Selva, Henry	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
32	De la Selva, Frederick	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
33	De la Selva, William	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
34	De la Selva, James	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
35	De la Selva, George	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			
36	De la Selva, Edward	M	1	White	England	London	1918	1918	Mauretania	London	New York			

In the message on the postcard, referring to the mixed nationalities in his squad, De la Selva wrote to his friend: 'They call us the foreign legion as we come from all over: Cuba, the British W. I., Panama, Nicaragua, Holland, France, Switzerland, Ireland, Lancashire, London, etc. Some mob! No history of the First World War – not even the regimental histories of

the North Lancs – mentions West Indians in this regiment. These fifteen black soldiers are probably the British West Indians listed alongside De la Selva on the manifest of the *Mauretania*, which returned soldiers to New York in May 1919: Austin Daniels, Harold Albury, Herbert Davies... These, it might be argued, are the real unknown soldiers of the First World War.