

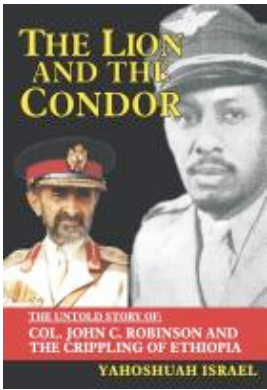
THE LION AND THE CONDOR



THE UNTOLD STORY OF:

**COL. JOHN C. ROBINSON AND
THE CRIPPLING OF ETHIOPIA**

YAHOSHUAH ISRAEL



Col. John C. Robinson was the first African American aviator licensed in the US, the first African American aviation instructor in America. He taught the first African American women pilots in America and the first Ethiopia women pilots. It was his idea that gave birth to the famous Tuskegee Airmen of WWII fame. Known as the "Brown Condor of Ethiopia," he became an international hero and legend fighting against Mussolini's fascism in Ethiopia in 1935.

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YAHOSHUAH ISRAEL



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Introduction

When I first started on the journey of writing this book, it was to be based on the unknown history of Col. John C. Robinson. My primary focus was on his life in Ethiopia, which seemed to be, for the most part, totally unknown. I was surprised that no previous writers had ever bothered to make the journey to Ethiopia to research and investigate the many questions and mysteries surrounding John Robinson that screamed to be addressed. I had read of his amazing accomplishments as the first black American pilot, who had also traveled to Ethiopia in 1935 and participated in the defense of Ethiopia against Mussolini's Fascist invasion. I was spellbound by his courage and dedication and his resolve to promote his race that enabled him to overcome enormous barriers and take an active part in the defense of Ethiopia, which, at that time was the last freestanding African nation ruled by a black man, Emperor Haile Selassie I—a physically small man with a huge persona.

In March 2014 I happened to be in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, when Thomas Simmons, the author of a book about Col. Robinson, visited the country and presented a profound and emotional lecture. The lecture was given at the home of the former president of Ethiopia, Girma Wolde Giorgis, who had been a close friend of Col. Robinson. I experienced the excitement of meeting some of the few remaining people who were fortunate to have known Robinson personally. Several days after the luncheon, I was speaking to Kibrat Bitule Tadela (also known as Engineer Tadela). Engineer, as he likes to be called, was one of the Ethiopian men who had been at the luncheon and who professed to have known Robinson, and I commented on the lecture and how amazed I was to learn about the incredible life the colonel had lived. To my surprise, Engineer told me in no uncertain terms that the author didn't know what he was talking about. I asked

him what he meant by that, to which he responded, “His book is bullshit!”

I was struck by his response, and a lengthy conversation ensued. It was Engineer’s statements and assertions that led to my decision to learn just exactly what the truth was about the life of this black American who, on the one hand, seemed to have lived a storybook life of gallantry and great accomplishments in the field of early aviation, but whose life, in the opinion of at least one individual, was quite overrated. Personally, I was unaware of another black American whose life story invoked as much passion and admiration as did the stories about Col. Robinson that I had heard at the luncheon. Of course I had read and studied Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. I had studied Marcus Garvey and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and I felt the ideas they had espoused and the organizations they had built were admirable, but I was awestruck by the extraordinary genius that Col. Robinson demonstrated and the remarkable courage he possessed—qualities that allowed him to go on repeated missions delivering strategic information and men, including Emperor Haile Selassie, to and from the front lines of the battlefields. I was amazed to realize that he took on these reconnaissance missions in planes that did not have the ability to engage in combat against deadly Italian fighter planes that ruled the skies of Ethiopia unchallenged because Ethiopia had no properly equipped military planes.

As a student of history, I had never encountered such a personality that had not been elevated to the status of a long-remembered hero and legend. Instead, it seemed in this case that exactly the opposite had occurred. I was confused as to how an obviously gallant and courageous man could sacrifice wealth, fame, and a life of comfort, only to be rewarded with the legacy of a lost gravesite and a total blackout in regards to his life and accomplishments—not in one country but two.

I had read a little about Col. John Robinson and knew about his being asked by Emperor Haile Selassie to come to Ethiopia and train

Ethiopian pilots to fight in the coming invasion. Mussolini, the Italian dictator, was determined to colonize Ethiopia and reclaim the glory that was once Rome. But I had read nothing in the kind of detail that had been presented in the presentation by Thomas Simmons. So, after hearing about this quiet giant of a forgotten man and then being struck by Engineer's comments, something took possession of me that drove me to learn the truth of his life, and it did not release me until I had uncovered long-forgotten and purposely concealed details about the man who is arguably one of America's great heroes. I also discovered equally forgotten details about men and women who were contemporaries of Col. Robinson and whose stories reveal such extraordinary levels of personal dedication and human perseverance under extreme circumstances that they demand to be told. These wonderful tales of sacrifice and determination inspired my research from day to day and energized me through months and months of tedious research and traveling.

After spending long hours, day after day, at the National Library of Ethiopia, the archives of the Ethiopian Study Center, and the archives of the *Ethiopian Herald*, I would be exhausted and would make my way back to my apartment. After assembling the information and facts that I had gathered that day, I would fall asleep, drained. Often I would have a dream related to the characters from this great historical period. When I awoke in the morning, I would be refreshed and energized by the awareness that what I was searching for was bigger than Col. Robinson and even bigger than the combined stories of the other unsung heroes. I realized that I was pursuing the restoration of an important segment of black American history, Ethiopian history, and most importantly, *American* history, which had been lost and forgotten. And as I followed its path, I realized that this awesome chapter missing from the history books had been distorted and twisted to the point that it was almost unrecognizable.

As I began to search through old archival material, historical records, and long-lost and often forgotten information about Col. Robinson, I began to discover events, people, and occurrences that were truly

inspiring. In my travels to and from the various locations where he worked and lived, I met and interviewed people who either knew him or were descended from people who knew him. As I combed through old newspaper articles and recorded information at the Ethiopian National Library and the Addis Ababa University Ethiopian Study Center, the mysterious life of the man who became known as the Brown Condor of Ethiopia began to take on flesh and personality; and with him came his contemporaries, like Rabbi Arnold Ford and his wife, Mignon Innis Ford, who were already living in Ethiopia when Colonel Robinson arrived. Homer Smith and David Talbot and a host of others who became associates and close friends of Robinson's also sprang to life. Looming in the background was the great Hakim Worqeneh Eschete, known internationally as Dr. Charles Martin, to whom Col. Robinson was, in the words of Dr. Martin's grandson, a very, very special friend who dined at the Martins's home almost nightly.

Whenever I spoke to anyone who knew Col. Robinson or knew of him, they would invariably speak positively, if not in glowing terms, of this man who has, for the most part, been totally forgotten. I have encountered at least five instances of individuals—both Ethiopians and, amazing as it may seem, Italians—who said that Col. Robinson treated them like a son. For a long while, however, every lead that I hoped would in fact lead me to the lost gravesite of Col. Robinson led me instead to a dead end. Then I met a family, to whom I will introduce you, who, because of the love of their father for the colonel, kept up a long tradition of putting flowers on Col. Robinson's grave. It was this family who helped me achieve what I considered at that time the ultimate goal—finding the long-lost grave of Col. Robinson. I say “at that time” because now, at the end of a wondrous journey, I am compelled by what I have learned of this remarkable man to petition the government for Col. John C. Robinson to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously. I cannot imagine anyone reading my account, which fills in many missing pieces of his life in Ethiopia, together with the great accounts of his accomplishments by writers such as Thomas Simmons and Phillip

Thomas Tucker, author of *John C. Robinson, Father of the Tuskegee Airmen*, and not feeling that he deserves such recognition. I feel that it is the responsibility of civilized people to acknowledge great deeds and accomplishments, especially when they not only impact our immediate community and society but also make an indelible impression on the world.

I am convinced that John Robinson's spirit at times guided me to sources of lost facts and information concerning his life and death—including previously unknown intimate details—that had been conspicuously missing from every book written about him. So amazing has this experience of revelation been that I found myself both humbled and exhilarated that I was gifted to be the instrument of its unveiling.

Over the period of my intense research, a picture slowly and methodically began to develop of a soft-spoken, quiet, and determined man who was not intimidated by the prospect of traveling halfway around the world to a country teetering on the precipice of an unbalanced and morally unjust war. A country that had been secretly sold out by its member countries in the League of Nations, England and France, to become the subjugated colony of Italy.

As I delved deeper, I slowly became aware that my research was not only about the life and death of the man known as the Brown Condor of Ethiopia; it was also about a much bigger and tremendously more tragic story: it was also about how Ethiopia, the last freestanding African country, which carried the beacon of liberation for all colonized nations, was intentionally and systematically relegated to being the most backward of all African nations. At a time when she was positioned to be the undisputed pacesetter and leader of both the African colonized nations and the Western nations of South America, Cuba, and the West Indies, as well as the rallying point for the black American community of North America, Ethiopia was intentionally hamstrung.

THE LION AND THE CONDOR

The Lion and the Condor describes how Emperor Haile Selassie found himself “liberated” from one colonial-minded nation, Italy, which sought to enslave Ethiopia, only to find himself in the iron grip of the biggest colonizer of the day, Britain. It describes how the British military plundered and pillaged an Ethiopia whose Italian occupiers had industrialized to such an extent that, as she stood at the end of the Italian occupation, Ethiopia would have been one of the leading African nations of the day—if not *the* leading nation—and might have ranked among the so-called First World nations of today, along with South Africa and Japan. The book explains how the emperor of Ethiopia was positioned, due to the immense respect and reverence that the colonized world had for him, to become a global leader of a stature not seen before or since.

Indeed, I began this work in search of the man called the Brown Condor, with the intention of telling his story—the story of a forgotten legacy that has been covered up and lost for more than seventy years. Buried to such an extraordinary degree that despite his having what has been called a state funeral, attended by members of the royal family, ambassadors, and high officials of the Ethiopian military and elite, the grave of this great black American, who made the ultimate sacrifice for the people of Ethiopia, seemed for many decades to have been hopelessly lost to posterity.

But I did indeed find him. After much digging and toiling and following long, winding roads, I found the man who had become an international war hero. The man who had been the first Westerner to fight against Fascism in defense of a nation wholly deserted by all the “freedom-loving and defending” nations of the world. Like the proverbial phoenix of mythological lore, I found him rising from his ashes, demanding to be acknowledged and given his rightful due. And as I rediscovered this long-lost American and Ethiopian hero, I found him pointing like a sentinel, not to his plight and his own disappointment, but that of an ill-destined nation that was betrayed and pillaged by the very “saviors” who have been credited with her deliverance.

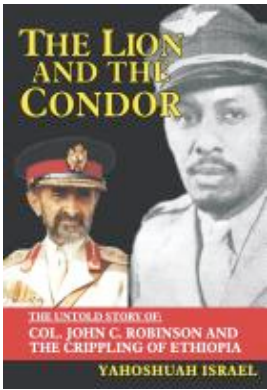
I found a story of masterful cunning and guile that has yet to be told in its entirety. A story that condemns Britain and America, as well as others, for the unforgivable deed of making sure that Ethiopia would remain the *least* of all nations, despite its having withstood the colonizing machinations of a deceitful League of Nations and the so-called civilized nations of the world.

I found a Col. Robinson who was even greater than the Col. Robinson who figured in the story I had been told on that bright, sunny day at President Girma's home. A man deserted initially by the American government when it refused to provide him the support and backing that would certainly have changed the outcome of Ethiopia's war against Fascism. And secondly, by the very emperor who sought his help in establishing the Imperial Ethiopian Air Force—the man for whom he repeatedly put his life at risk, doing, in his own words, “my part in the defense of Ethiopia.”

I also found a proud nation that, having withstood the terrible atrocities of war and internal domestic strife, is today rising up as one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa. A nation destined to take its long-awaited place of leadership among the industrialized nations of the world. I found a mighty young lion and a soaring brown condor who personify the words of the famous writer Earnest Hemingway:

“a man [like a nation] can be beaten but not defeated.”

Ethiopia and Col. Robinson and a host of brave and courageous patriots were beaten in a war tilted heavily and unfairly against them; they were betrayed and crippled by politics and policies that ultimately altered the course of history. But the spirit that compels a nation and its citizens to stand against injustice and fight for freedom, Ethiopia and Col. John C. Robinson were never defeated. This book is a testament to that undying fact and a tribute to the greatness of the people and to the legacy of the man.



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