

The West Indian soldier in Africa

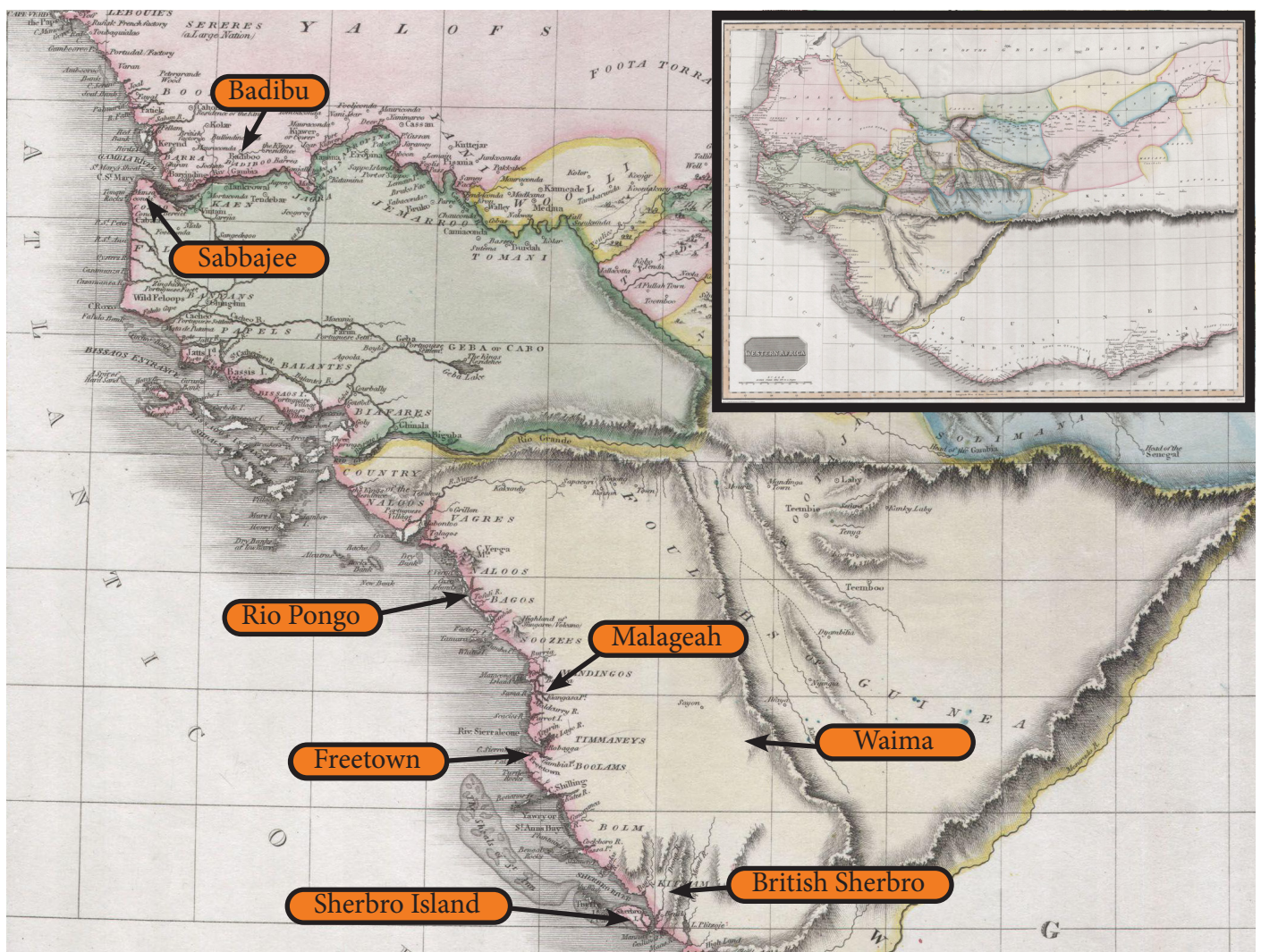
When: 1812-1927

Participants: Britain vs The Marabouts, Bamba Mihi Lahi, the Sofas, Bai Bureh

Key campaigns: The Rio Pongo expedition, The Marabout War, The expeditions to Malageah, The Hut Tax War

Key battles and places: Sierra Leone, The Gambia, The Gold Coast, Sabbajee, Malageah, Badibu, Rio Pongo, British Sherbro, Waima, Bagwema

The West India Regiments were employed in West Africa, as the region had the same reputation as the Caribbean in that it was hotbed of disease that was fatal to Europeans; black soldiers were believed to be more resistant to the local diseases, which proved to be mostly true according to the medical reports. The West India Regiments already had a link to the area early in the nineteenth century, due to the recruiting depot that had operated in Sierra Leone 1812-1814. Many West India Regiment veterans also settled in Sierra Leone when they retired, founding towns named after people and places from British military history, including Wellington, Waterloo, Hastings and Gibraltar Town. Their presence also led to the development of a new creole language, Krio, which is still widely spoken in Sierra Leone. Their service in Africa was, in many ways, similar to their service in the Caribbean, generally consisting of garrison duties, but in Africa they saw more combat, taking part in various small expeditions and, on occasion, in larger engagements. There were countless operations over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the following are some of the more significant events.



Following the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807, a large proportion of the British forces in Africa participated in actions to disrupt the trade. Sometimes this involved an expedition against the Africa-based traders themselves, whether they were European or African. In one instance in 1820, this involved the 2nd West India Regiment participating in an expedition up the River Pongo near Sierra Leone, against the Afro-American slave trader, Benjamin Curtis, and his local allies. Curtis's allies had brutally captured the crew of *HMS Thistle*, who had been engaged in anti-slave trade operations. Therefore, three companies were sent up the Pongo and attacked and destroyed the towns of these allies, as well as Curtis's base of operations and much of his property at Curtistown. Expeditions during the nineteenth century frequently featured an aspect of freeing slaves; an example is the conflict against the inhabitants of Mongray in 1875, who had plundered towns in British Sherbro and taken their inhabitants to sell into slavery in the July. A contingent comprised of armed police and men of the 1st West India Regiment was sent to negotiate with the Mongray chiefs, which resulted in the return of the captives. However, this was quickly followed by fresh disturbances, which required the West India Regiment to fight, leading to the establishment of a peace treaty.

Britain also found itself drawn into such local disputes in West Africa as the Marabout conflict. The Marabouts, a type of Muslim cleric found in the region, were in conflict with the Soninke, an ethnic group in Senegal, Mali and Gambia, who formed the ruling class of the Kingdom of Kombo and largely followed traditional African religions; this resulted in a civil war within the Kingdom. Britain, as an ally of the Soninke, found itself drawn into this conflict and hosted peace negotiations in 1853. However, not all the Marabouts agreed with the treaty, and the inhabitants of the town of Sabbajee, home to the largest mosque in the region, continued hostilities. This led to the successful siege of the town on 1st June 1853 by the West India Regiments. The Regiments returned to the town two years later when Fodi Osumanu, an influential figure in the town, sent an armed force to the British-controlled settlement of Jossung to capture the wife of a man he had imprisoned. Despite a few unsuccessful attempts to arrest Osumanu and attack Sabbajee, the town was eventually captured in August 1853 and Osumanu's forces defeated.

However, not all actions in which the West India Regiments participated in Africa were successes, the debacle at Malageah in May 1855 being such an instance. Bamba Mima Lahi, the King of Malageah, had agreed a treaty with the British the previous year, and promised to make restitution for his attacks on British mercantile factories on the River Mellicourie. However, he had still not paid the agreed amount by the following year and the Acting Governor of Sierra Leone, a West Indian of mixed race, Robert Dougan, ordered that 150 men of the West India Regiments be sent to Malageah to burn the town and capture the King. This was against the advice of Captain R. D'Oyley Fletcher of the 1st West India Regiment, who argued that far more men were needed and that the enemy force they would face could be significantly stronger. Nevertheless, Dougan insisted and a force was duly embarked. Following an unsuccessful negotiation with the king, the town was attacked and set on fire. However, the town was not totally destroyed and, despite his better judgement, D'Oyley and his men were ordered to return the next day to complete the job. No sooner had they landed on the river bank from *HMS Teazer* than they came under heavy enemy fire and over a third of the total number of men were killed. The order was given to retreat and more soldiers were killed covering the withdrawal, whilst a number of the last survivors had to swim half a mile to reach *HMS Teazer*. With the deaths of some 70-90 men, Dougan was held responsible for this catastrophe, having acted beyond his authority, and was stripped of his rank.

William Fergusson

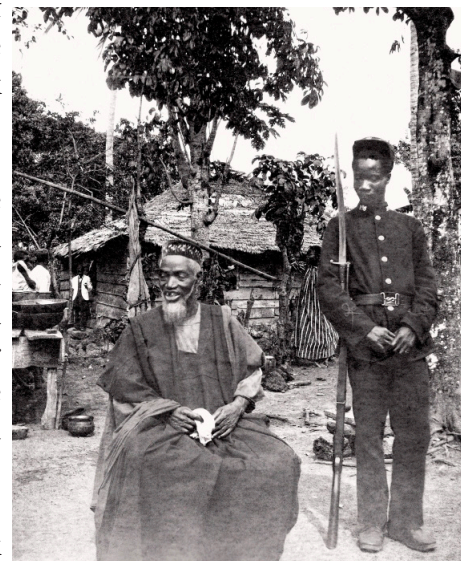
As shown by Robert Dougan, the West India Regiments were not the only West Indians in Africa. William Fergusson was born in Jamaica in 1795 to a white Scottish father and a black West Indian mother. He studied at the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh and, after qualifying in December 1813, joined the Army as an Assistant Surgeon. At the request of the Governor for a trained surgeon, one who could help the Africans who had been liberated from slave ships by the British, he was sent to Sierra Leone in 1815. He was promoted over the years and served as Acting Governor, being eventually appointed Governor in 1845, but dying the following year. He is the first non-white West Indian Army officer in the British Army of which we know, over a century before Walter Tull and his contemporaries. There were also other black Army officers serving in Africa in the nineteenth century, including surgeon James Africanus Beale Horton.

slavery. The Regiment faced a hard march through marshland and rain to Tungea, where they were able to resupply and eventually returned at last to Freetown, arriving on 21st January.



The Attack on Bagwema

1898 saw the outbreak of the Hut Tax War, a conflict that arose out of the creation of the Protectorate of Sierra Leone in August 1896 and the imposition of a new tax on dwellings of five shillings a year. The lack of consultation of the local rulers and rising anti-British feeling led to conflict when the tax began to be collected at the beginning of the year. 1,100 officers and men of the West India Regiments were involved in the strife. The African forces were led by Bai Bureh, ruler of Kasseh, and a chieftain of the Temne people, who had in the past aided the West India Regiments in other operations. He now carried out a campaign of guerrilla warfare. The West India Regiment formed a flying column, which over the course of twelve weeks from 15th April 1898, travelled throughout the territory, surrounding the town of Karene, dealing with the rebel forces and restabilising British control. This campaign was conducted in heavy rains, with up to five combat actions a day; marching took place from sunrise to 17:00 hrs with a half hour break in the morning and an hour and a half break in the afternoon. When the Mende people of Sherbro joined the rebellion, the West India Regiment formed part of the Sherbro Expeditionary force that was sent to the town. Bai Bureh eventually surrendered himself and was sent into exile, but peace was not fully restored until early 1899.



Photograph of Bai Bureh, taken by Lieutenant Arthur Greer, West India Regiment

The role of the West India Regiment in Africa was described in an article in *The Navy and Army Illustrated* on 10th December 1898: “Whenever fighting has been necessary on the West Coast of Africa, the West India Regiment has almost invariably been in the forefront of it, and at times has suffered severely without having even the consolation that it had qualified for a medal.” Yet at the same time it was “much more clearly recognised that the West India Regiment is really an ordinary Line infantry Regiment”, as opposed to a colonial corps.

Locally raised regiments, such as the West African Regiment and the West Africa Frontier Force, were formed at the end of the nineteenth century and they assumed much of the military responsibilities in Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast, reducing the West India Regiment’s role accordingly. Arguably, the most notable set of conflicts in which the West India Regiments participated in Africa were the Ashanti Wars, a series of five conflicts of varying scale, fought over the course of the nineteenth century and which require their own focus.