

Introduction

In the popular imagination of Britain's military past, most people picture the fields of Waterloo or the horrors of the Battle of the Somme. Precious few give thought to the battles that were fought between the European Powers, not on their home continent but across the Atlantic Ocean. Some of these conflicts occurred in mainland North and South America but many took place in the Caribbean Sea, not only in the form of great naval battles but in military actions fought by the British Army in the islands of the West Indies and on the coasts of Central America against the Spanish, Dutch and French.

Although supplanted in modern consciousness by the vicissitudes of wars closer to our own time, in the past the dangers of Caribbean service were foremost in the minds of the British people, not just because of the perils of warfare, which were also encountered on the battlefields of Europe, but also because of the serious threat to the health of the troops; the hot climate and, critically, widespread disease took its toll. Indeed, the danger of serving in the West Indies for British troops was such that it became known as the 'White Man's Grave'.

This story is not just one of the British soldiers serving in the West Indies, but of West Indians serving in the British Army. Various local regiments and militia had existed since the British first colonised the region, but, on occasion, regiments were created specifically for service in the Caribbean. A few West Indians of black, white and mixed-race could even be found serving in the British Army in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of them later settling in Britain; these non-white veterans helped to shape Britain's early black community.

The wars with the French at the end of the eighteenth century, and the large death toll amongst British troops in the Caribbean, particularly on Haiti, prompted the authorities to recruit more West Indians to the Army in the belief that such men were more resistant to the effects of both climate and disease in the region. This led to the creation of the West India Regiments in 1795, who subsequently served in the Caribbean and West Africa for over a century.

Many Caribbean men who joined the British Army later settled in Britain themselves, adding to the growing black community of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Later veterans of the British Caribbean would also settle in Britain after the First and Second World Wars, becoming the earliest members of the Windrush generation. The relationship between the Caribbean and the British Army continues to the present day, with West Indians still joining the British Army and the Army still operating in the Caribbean, often in partnership with the local Defence Forces.

This e-book is one of numerous outcomes of *The West Indian Soldier* project, carried out in partnership with the National Army Museum and with the generous support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund. We hope that this work presents another important aspect of Britain's and the Caribbean's mutual heritage and demonstrates that the long-lasting ties between the two date back centuries, each significantly contributing to the development of the other.

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