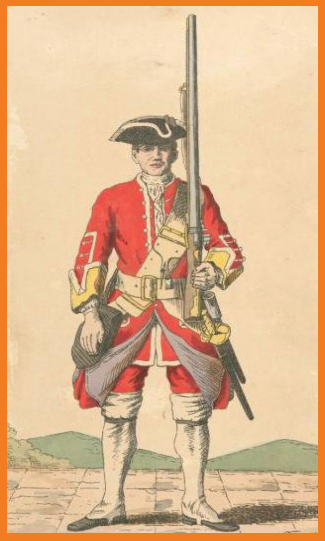
Serving in the West Indies

The British soldiers who served in the Caribbean faced many difficulties during their time there and found themselves having to adapt to the region's peculiarities. The dangers were such that the West Indies acquired a reputation as a graveyard. The difficulties started as soon as the soldiers left Britain, as they were transported on a long and dangerous voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, usually in very cramped conditions aboard a transport ship or a Royal Naval vessel. The ships could be battered by storms and were also subject to the nature of the winds; these could determine how many weeks a ship took to reach the Caribbean, extending in some cases to many months travel. For example, in one instance a ship which left Britain on 9th December arrived at Carlisle Bay, Barbados, the normal point of arrival for British vessels travelling to the West Indies, in mid-March, on the same day as another vessel which had left the same British port on 9th February. The voyage itself could prove deadly, as the close quarters and uncleanliness of the ships served as breeding grounds for disease.

The soldiers also had to cope with the harsh climate, which proved to be, for the most part, both hot and humid. Horatio Nelson, the great British naval hero, was stationed for some time in Antigua, one of the main British military outposts in the region, and described it as a *"hell hole"*. The heat and humidity made marching long distances very unpleasant and difficult and, in a number of instances, such actions proved fatal for some men. The traditional uniform of the British Army, the famous red coats, did nothing to alleviate the soldiers' suffering, although attempts were made at various junctures to introduce clothing that was better-suited to the climate. In addition to the heat and humidity, the Army also had to face the dangers of the hurricane season, when great storms sweep through the Caribbean Sea, leaving devastation in their wake. There are many records of Army bases being damaged during these storms and of lives being lost. For example, in the storm that struck St. Lucia on 21st October 1817, not only was the island's Governor killed but Brevet-Major Burdett of the 1st West India Regiment, commanding the garrison, died along with his wife, children and servants, when their house collapsed on top of them. The men barely had time to escape the barracks before they were destroyed, and their clothing and equipment was blown into the nearby woods by the strong winds. Earthquakes too posed a threat to life.

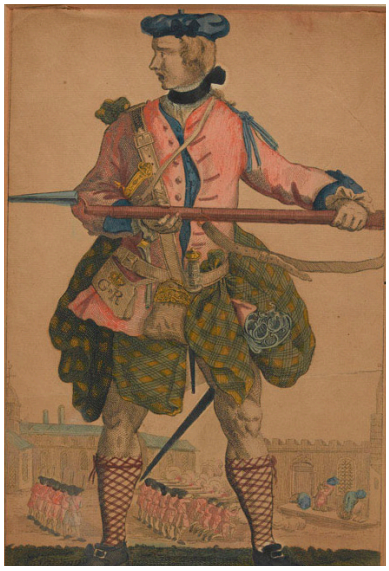
The 38th Regiment of Foot

The 38th Regiment holds the distinction of having the longest overseas posting in the entire history of the British Army, serving abroad for 57 years. They first arrived in Antigua on 19th May 1707 as Colonel Luke Lillingston's Regiment, and were eventually numbered as the 38th. For much of their time in the West Indies, they served as garrison troops in the Leeward Islands, but were also known to serve as Marines aboard the ships of the Royal Navy. Matters were often difficult, with major delays in the arrival of pay and new equipment and clothing. On occasion, both officers and men took civilian employment on the side to support themselves. In order to repair their uniforms, the men used Holland Sacking, which was used for packing sugar. The Regiment was later granted the right to wear a brown patch on their uniforms in memory of this. The Regiment eventually left in 1764 and later became known as the South Staffordshire Regiment. Due to the amalgamation of Regiments over the last two centuries, they are now part of the Mercian Regiment, who still wear the patch symbolising the Holland Sacking.



Although many young soldiers who had not been to the region before treated the experience as an adventure and a novelty, amongst old soldiers, with previous experience of the Caribbean, the idea was clearly met with abhorrence. Jonathan Leach, then a young officer in the 70th Regiment, later recounted that when his contingent was ordered to the Caribbean, *"This intelligence caused some long faces among a few of our old hands who had previously served in that part of the world; but the greater part of us being young and thoughtless, the order for moving, being a novelty, was received with pleasure rather than dislike."* In many cases, the reputation of the region as a hotbed of death and disease preceded it and, on many occasions, troops would not be told where they

were going until they were aboard ship and underway, so as to prevent issues before departure. In some instances, they were even told a false destination before they embarked. Fear of service in the West Indies led many troops to attempt avoidance tactics, with some even inflicting wounds on themselves to render them unfit for further service. Others attempted to desert before they departed for the Caribbean but this carried its own risk of death, as a capital sentence was often the result of being found guilty of this offence at a Court Martial. Some members of the Black Watch were marched from Scotland to London. Suspecting that they were to be sent to the West Indies, 100 of them deserted and were later captured in Northamptonshire. All were convicted of desertion, but all save three had their death sentences commuted, and 38 were actually sent to the West Indies. Desertion could also lead to service in the Caribbean; those condemned to death could be offered the option to avoid hanging, a choice also offered to criminals outside the military. These men were placed, alongside other convicts, in regiments specifically raised for service in the West Indies. These included the Royal West India Rangers, the Royal York Rangers and the York Chasseurs. These three regiments, raised in the early years of the nineteenth century, were all disbanded in 1819, when it became clear that there was no ongoing threat to the British Caribbean.



Corporal Samuel McPherson of the Black Watch, one of the three men executed
Image © National Army Museum, London

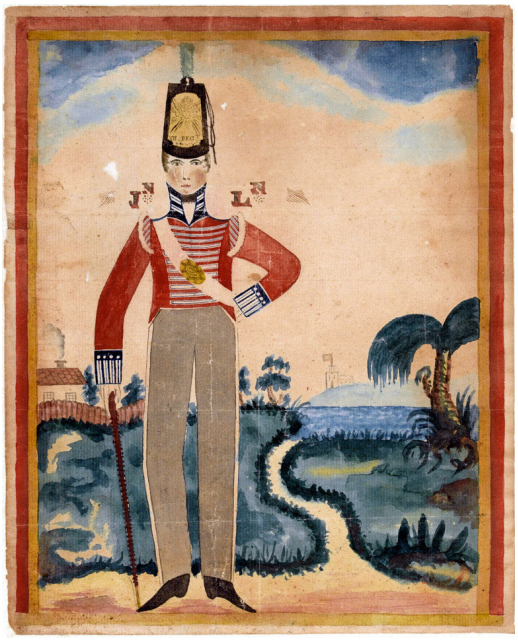
Officers had their own options to avoid service in the West Indies, some approved and some not; they simply absented themselves from their regiments and remained in Britain, which was not necessarily viewed as desertion and certainly was treated more leniently than if a common soldier had performed a similar action. Although there were many attempts to convince and indeed order these officers to join their regiments, it remained a problem with postings to the Caribbean well into the nineteenth century. Others exploited the system of Army commissions to avert West Indian service, either by purchasing a commission in a different regiment, or exchanging commissions with a willing officer from another regiment who was prepared to go to the Caribbean.

A cavalry sergeant in the Caribbean, (c.1830)
Image © National Army Museum, London

In addition to the difficulties presented by the climate and disease, another issue which affected almost the entire Army in the Caribbean was the cost of living, with both officers and men struggling with pay that did not allow them to live in the manner to which they might be accustomed. One commander reported that the cost of feeding a soldier each day was twice their daily pay before the usual deductions. Matters could be exacerbated by the delays to pay that frequently occurred; it was not unknown for this to be caused by a paymaster embezzling funds. Officers were expected to meet a certain standard of living and, whilst those from wealthy families, especially if they had relations in the region, were able to weather the cost, others could not and found themselves living in much more reduced circumstances than they would have otherwise expected. Some officers managed to find private employment to supplement their income, a practice that could also be found amongst the ranks wherever possible.

The difficulties of both men and officers led the Army and British Government to try to solve the problem, but in as economical a way as possible. Thus, the British Government asked the local colonial governments to help support the Army in the region, which led to further political clashes between London and the Caribbean. Although the colonial governments wanted soldiers stationed in the area for both external and internal security, and often demanded more troops than they had been given, they were reluctant to meet these costs; these could take the form of paying for the Army's provisions,

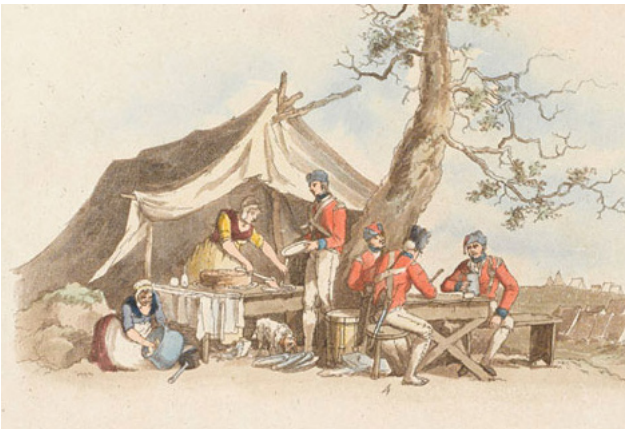
helping with the construction and upkeep of local fortifications or an additional stipend for pay. They felt they were entitled to the Army's protection by default. However, generally, the local legislatures did contribute where it was possible for them to do so but the results varied from colony to colony. In Jamaica, officers received an extra 40% to their weekly pay, whilst private soldiers received an extra 100%. Yet such support was not always sufficient. Lieutenant Colonel Capadose, who served for sixteen years in the West Indies in the early nineteenth century, in his memoirs, complained that the allowance in British Guiana was *"wretchedly small"*, deeming it the most expensive place to live in the Caribbean and advocating that allowances should be doubled throughout the West Indies.



A soldier of the 7th Regiment of Foot in the Caribbean (c.1805),
Image © National Army Museum, London

The British Army could not exist within the West Indies without encountering the 'monstrous evil' of slavery, and indeed would be forced to develop its own peculiar relationship with this fact of Caribbean life in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Individual officers and soldiers often recorded their own views and experiences with slavery in their memoirs. Whilst some officers, most notably those who were linked by family to the region and owned property there, engaged in slavery, others were repulsed by what they saw and resisted it in their own ways. Jonathan Leach, during his time in the West Indies as a young officer, recalled an occasion when he and another officer came across an overseer brutally flogging an old slave woman, and responded by riding a short distance away to shoot at his legs: *"peppered his legs pretty handsomely"*. In another instance, George Pinckard and his fellow officers refused aid to the Manager of the Lancaster Plantation; the latter had flogged a slave to death and, with the dead man's friends seeking vengeance, requested protection. Some officers, whilst not necessarily engaging in slavery themselves, commented that, in general, there was little difference in the life of a plantation slave and that of a rural labourer in Britain, presumably not having witnessed some of the tortures and punishments to which slaves were subjected. Some soldiers formed relationships with the local populace, which led to the birth of children. A prominent example of this is Mary Seacole, later famed for her actions in the Crimean War, whose father was a Scottish soldier who married a local Jamaican doctress. In some circumstances, when the child was born to a wealthy officer, they would be sent to be educated or even brought up in Britain, much as the children of West Indian planters were.

Day to day life, when there was not a war to be fought, was often characterised by boredom, hence why so many men found comfort in alcohol or smoking. They would be roused by bugle call before dawn and the parade would be carried out early in the cool morning. This would be followed by the morning meal, with the second meal served at 12:30. Food consisted largely of salted meats, bread, rice and peas and was occasionally supplemented by other local vegetables that the men could procure. Beyond this, unless they had guard duty or another task, the soldiers were left to their own devices until the evening parade at 17:00. Officers had more options for their leisure time and many attended local social functions, enjoying dances or dinners with the upper echelons of Caribbean society. They also had a greater ability to go out and explore the colony in which they were stationed, visiting plantations and their owners. Some engaged in horse racing, if they could afford the high price of a horse in the Caribbean, or went shooting. Many recorded their experiences, as did some of their wives, providing us with first-hand accounts of their time in the Caribbean and how they viewed West Indian society in comparison to that of Britain.



Soldiers of the Napoleonic Wars enjoying a meal in camp,
Image © National Army Museum, London