

The First World War

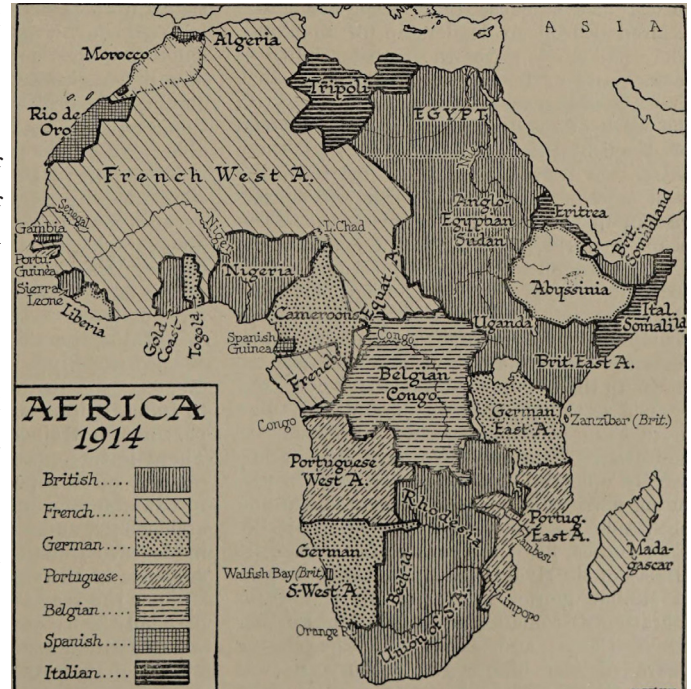
When: 1914-1918

Combatants: Britain and allies vs Germany, the Ottoman Empire and allies

Key campaigns: Middle East, East and West Africa, the Western Front

Key places: Egypt, Palaestine, Togoland, the Cameroons, German East Africa, France

The West India Regiment continued to serve in the First World War, in the campaigns in West Africa, where they had served for so long in the previous century. This time they saw combat in the early months of the war against forces stationed in the German colony of Togoland (modern day Togo and the Volta Region of Ghana) and the Cameroons, which resulted in victory for the allied British and French forces in the region. The Togoland campaign ended in 26th August 1914, when the Germans surrendered. The Cameroons campaign began in September 1914 and the West India Regiment formed part of a force composed of British, French and Belgian troops, with detachments from the machine gun and signalling section taking part. The campaign lasted for two years and the Regiments were awarded a battle honour to display on their colours: 'Cameroons 1914-16'.



A map of the different colonies in Africa 1914

The whole of the Regiment was assembled at Sierra Leone in April 1916 and in the August were sent to German East Africa, where they fought against the German forces commanded by General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck; at the end of the campaign they were involved in almost continuous combat from the 23rd September 1917 to the 18th October, with the Regiment operating Stokes guns, a type of trench mortar. The 16th to 18th October 1917 saw the Battle of Nyangao, also known as the Battle of Mahiwa, one of the most lethal battles of the African campaign, with the British incurring 2,500 casualties, killed and wounded, half the number of their force. Many awards were granted from this campaign, including 8 Distinguished Conduct Medals and six Military Medals, including that awarded to Lance Corporal Ruben Robertson (6353), and two Meritorious Service Medals. Another battle honour was awarded; 'East Africa 1914-1918'.



The 2nd battalion of the West India Regiment, after the African campaigns had ceased, was sent to Palestine in the last months of the war where they served behind the lines and did not engage in active combat; nevertheless, this earned them another battle honour for their service. This was their last major campaign, and the return of the 2nd battalion to Jamaica in 1919 in many ways heralded the end of the Regiment, although it was not dissolved until 1927. This was due to changing defence priorities and the policy in the 1920s of reducing defence spending. After a small ceremony, the regimental colours were handed over to the King and are kept at Windsor Castle.

The last colour of the West India Regiment
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Edward Jones with a Lion statue in Trafalgar Square

The story of the Caribbean in the First World War was by no means limited to the West India Regiment. Many West Indians were eager to enlist and serve in the British forces, with many paying for their own passage across the sea to Britain to join various regiments; for example, Edward Jones of Barbados joined the Cheshire Regiment as a Private.

However, despite the initial resistance of the War Office, the efforts of the Colonial Office and the Governments of the British West Indies, aided in no small measure by the personal support of King George V, resulted in the creation of the British West Indies Regiment. This fighting regiment was initially created in 1915 and served until 1918, leading to the creation over time of twelve battalions, with 15,204 men volunteering for service in the regiment by the end of the war. The volunteers faced several issues before they even set foot in a combat zone, including the infamous incident aboard the troop carrier *SS Verdala*, which was diverted to Nova Scotia to avoid enemy attack. With a broken heating system and a lack of suitable warm clothing for the men, many suffered frostbite and had to have extremities amputated, and five men even died. This incident, which caused widespread discontent in the Caribbean, led to a temporary reduction in the number of volunteers. The men who first arrived in Britain were sent to Seaford Camp, where many fell ill and some even died from infections such as influenza; they were not prepared for the difference in climate between the Caribbean and the UK and were not issued with sufficient warm clothing or heaters to compensate for the low temperatures.

Three of these battalions, the 1st, 2nd and 5th, served in the Middle Eastern Campaign in Egypt and Palestine. Whilst the 5th was a reserve, training battalion, the 1st and 2nd Battalions took an active part in the fight against the Ottoman Empire, serving in the campaign that resulted in the Ottoman surrender. The 1st saw action at Umbrella Hill, with their machine gun section acting in support of two raids on the Turkish lines. At Dumbell Hill and Two Tree Farm, during the assault on the Gaza Beersheba line which led to the capture of Jerusalem, they came into combat with the Ottoman 58th Regiment stationed at Atawineh Redoubt and helped to cover the retreat of the Imperial Service Cavalry in the face of heavy enemy fire.



A West Indian machine gun crew

During this time, the 2nd Battalion served as troops for the Army Headquarters, guarding both outposts and captured Turkish prisoners. Both Battalions saw combat in the Jordan Valley under the overall command of General Edward Chaytor, where the 2nd were noted for their brave advance in the face of heavy enemy fire towards Bakr and Chalk Ridges. The 1st Battalion secured Grant Ridge and Bagahallah and then played a key role in securing of Damieh Bridgehead over the River Jordan. Meanwhile, the 2nd repelled a Turkish attack over the river. They distinguished themselves through their actions, with several of their number winning awards for bravery and the commendation of the campaign's commanders. A small detachment from these regiments also served in a limited capacity in East Africa.



The men of the British West Indies Regiment in the Middle East

The other battalions served in Western Europe where, although they were classed as infantry battalions, they operated as labour battalions, ensuring that defences were built and maintained and transporting military supplies, most notably ammunition. This was due in large part to the authorities being unhappy with the idea of Black troops fighting White Europeans, even if they were the enemy, a problem which did not apply in the fight against the Ottomans. Although this lacked the perceived 'glamour' of a fighting unit, the work was by no means less dangerous as such supplies were often the target

of enemy attacks and by its very nature was hard and laborious. Their duties included carrying shells up to the large guns during the Battle of the Somme, whilst under heavy enemy fire. In other instances, the men secured burning ammunition dumps which could have exploded if they had not acted promptly, a dangerous deed for which several won awards for bravery. The men took pride in such work and adopted the moniker of the 'King George Steam Engine', as a sign of their labours and personal connection to the British Monarch. There are some unconfirmed reports that some men of the British West Indies Regiment did engage in some fighting on the Western Front, but this was never officially approved.



Men of the British West Indies Regiment in France

Unfortunately, the story of the British West Indies Regiment came to an unhappy end when, at the end of the war, they were sent to Cimino Camp in Taranto, Italy. In light of harsh and discriminatory treatment, which included, amongst other matters, being denied a pay rise given to other troops and being forced to dig latrines for Italian labourers, some men of the Regiment mutinied, which was not an uncommon occurrence amongst regiments of any origin in the fraught period following the war whilst men were waiting demobilisation. Nevertheless, the Taranto mutiny resulted in the men of the British West Indies Regiment being transported back to the Caribbean under armed guard, even those who had not been present at Cimino Camp at the time.

The contemporary racial divisions meant that regulations were in place to bar men of non-European racial origin, as many from the West Indies were, from holding an officer's commission. However, that rule was broken on several occasions and men of West Indian families in Britain and from the region itself rose to



2nd Lieutenant Euan Lucie-Smith
Royal Warwickshire Regiment

hold commissions. Most famous of these is Walter Tull, the former professional footballer who played for Clapham Town, Northampton Town and Tottenham Hotspur, who died during the German's Spring Offensive in 1918 and whose body was never located. However, he was not the first black officer in the regular Army, that distinction belonging to William Fergusson. Nor was Tull even the first officer of black West Indian ancestry to serve in the First World War. Others include George Bemand, commissioned in May 1915, who was killed by an enemy shell in France on Boxing Day, 1916, whilst serving as a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery. Euan Lucie-Smith, who was born in Jamaica in December 1889 and had some black ancestry on his mother's side, served in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, being commissioned on 14th November 1914, shortly after the outbreak of war and died on 25th April 1915 during the Second Battle of Ypres. David Louis Clemetson was appointed an officer in the Yeomanry, following in the footsteps of Nathaniel Wells, a West Indian who was born a slave and son of a plantation owner, but inherited his father's wealth and served in the Monmouthshire Yeomanry in the early nineteenth century.

Nor was Tull the highest ranked. That honour belonged to Allan Noel Minns from Norfolk, whose father was one of the first black mayors in Britain. He had just finished his medical training when war broke out and he volunteered to serve in the Royal Army Medical Corps. He served in the Gallipoli campaign and later in Mesopotamia, being mentioned in despatches, and was awarded the Military Cross and the Distinguished Service Order for his efforts. In the Gallipoli campaign, notable for its dangers and high death toll, he rose to

the temporary rank of Major, allowing him to command his unit, the 39th Field Ambulance, a position that he held for about six months between August 1915 and January 1916. He eventually received the permanent rank of Captain. The reason that these men were able to secure these commissions in a time when racial prejudice ruled that they should be unable to do so, is that they had lighter skin tones than many others due to their creole ancestry. This allowed sympathetic medical officers to circumvent Army regulations, by describing their skin tones in euphemistic terms, such as “*dusky*”. Men with darker skin tones were denied these commissions, including George Bemand’s brother Harold, and G.O. Rushdie-Gray, despite the fact that he was well-suited for a commission in the Veterinary Corps, having served as the Government of Jamaica’s Chief Veterinary Officer as well as in the West India Regiment, and having a recommendation from the Governor of Jamaica. Several white West Indians also held officers’ commissions, some in the British West Indies Regiment such as Arnold E. Thompson of Jamaica.



2nd Lieutenant Arnold Thompson,
British West Indies Regiment

What is notable is that although conscription laws were passed in the Caribbean, they were never activated. Every man who came from the West Indies to support the war effort was a volunteer. It is impossible to accurately number those that did so, but the British West Indies Regiment alone was composed of over 15,000 men. The experiences of these men, both positive and negative, would influence the development of the Caribbean over the coming years, with many of the veterans rising to positions of leadership in civilian life. These men included such figures as Arthur Andrew Cipriani and Tubal Uriah Butler, both served in the British West Indies Regiment and became important figures in Trinidadian politics. Norman Washington Manley, who served in the Royal Field Artillery and saw action at the Somme and Ypres, and later as a politician in Jamaica, helped to secure the island’s independence from Britain in 1962, becoming its first Premier. Manley wrote about his experiences in the war. This included an element of racism, with Manley noting that “*Corporals and Sergeants resented my sharing status with them... It was only the Officer class that I could expect to behave with ordinary decency and both aspects of this phenomenon I fully understood.*” However, he also recorded that some of his comrades were not so prejudiced and were prepared to defend him, “*I have heard a real tough guy get hold of a new arrival, a casualty replacement, who automatically called me ‘Darkie’, and take him aside and say ‘Don’t call him that – he doesn’t like it. We call him Bill and we like him!’*”

For more information on the role of the West Indies in the First World War, both in the Army and beyond, please see the [material](#) produced by the West India Committee during our [Caribbean’s Great War](#) Project.



The badge of the
British West Indies
Regiment