

# The Second World War

**When:** 1939-1945

**Combatants:** Britain and allies vs Germany and the Axis powers

**Key campaigns:** The North African Campaign, The Home Front

**Key places:** Italy, North Africa, Egypt, Britain

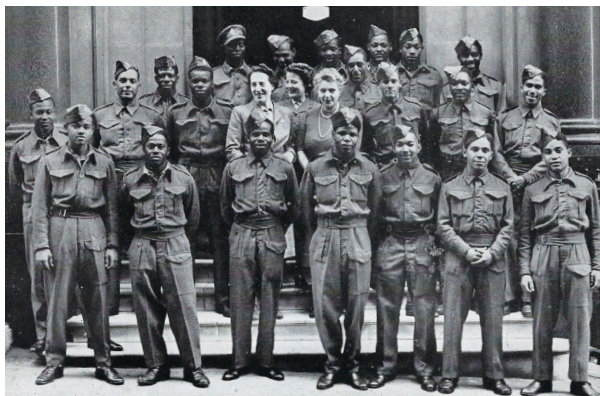
By the outbreak of the Second World War there was no West Indian Regiment left in existence; the British West Indies Regiment had been dissolved shortly after the end of the First World War and the West India Regiment was disbanded in 1927, due to changes in imperial defence policy. It was no longer needed in West Africa owing to the creation of local regiments in that region, and the British Caribbean was now at peace, so no longer required the presence of a regular Army regiment, and had local defence forces on which to rely. There was also the necessity to make stringent reductions as a consequence of increased public spending on defence in the inter-war years. Army Order 317, issued in September 1926, brought the West India Regiment to a close, parading for the last time on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1927 at Up Park Camp. The regimental colours were presented to King George V and are now kept at Windsor Castle. An attempt was made to resurrect the regiment in the 1930s, as the colonial governments felt it would address some of the issues caused by mass unemployment as a result of the Great Depression, but the War Office refused, arguing that such a move would be poor value for money.

When war came again in 1939, the local defence forces of the Caribbean were divided under two commands. The North Caribbean Force was composed of battalions from the Bahamas, Bermuda, the Leeward Islands and Jamaica, being headquartered on the latter island. The South Caribbean Force was headquartered on Trinidad and also encompassed the Windward Islands and Barbados. As was the case in Britain, many islands created Home Guards to keep watch for enemy shipping and potential invasions. This also included local branches for dependant islands in some territories; for example, the Caymanian Home Guard was a division of the Jamaican Home Guard. These Home Guards received military training and maintained their watch on the coasts of their respective islands, although the exact nature of their operations could differ; the Caymanian Home Guard kept a watch on the coast of Grand Cayman for twenty-four hours a day from a series of watchtowers; the Barbados Home Guard operated only at night, from their own homes. The local forces in the region also had to take charge of Prisoners of War, who were sent to the islands, much as they had been in the First World War.



A replica Caymanian Home Guard watchpost

Despite the negative experiences of many in the previous conflict, thousands of West Indians volunteered again. However, this time the Caribbean contribution would be more evident in the other branches of the military, most notably the Royal Air Force, where by the end of the war 400 West Indians



Jamaican members of the Royal Engineers

served as Airmen and over 5,500 travelled to Britain to serve as aircrew. Many also joined the Merchant Navy. Although there was still some prejudice against recruiting black West Indians into the Army, the joint efforts of the Colonial Office and the West India Committee were able to secure their inclusion, especially as many of them possessed useful skills that were in short supply, such as mechanical engineering. By May 1942, West Indians could be found serving in over 40 different regiments, with a sizeable contingent in the Royal Engineers. Many of these engineers served in the Middle East and North Africa, providing vital support for the efforts of General Montgomery and his Army.

© The West India Committee

Many in the Caribbean, however, again felt the need for their own regiment, with both Jamaica and Trinidad offering to raise contingents in 1940. The experiences of the British West Indies Regiment posed some questions as to whether a new regiment should be raised and some again suggested resurrecting the West India Regiment. The War Office remained opposed to the creation of a new corps, citing issues of climate, accommodation and transport. The latter was a particular concern as German U-Boat activity was rife in the Caribbean, causing serious damage to British shipping, and a slow-moving troop transport would have been an irresistible target and would require a strong escort. By 1943, the War Office was offering to create a garrison unit to serve in either Ceylon or Madagascar, but the Colonial Office continued to advocate a Combat regiment, possibly for a role in the Mediterranean theatre, arguing that a refusal could be seen as an insult to the British Caribbean. Prime Minister Winston Churchill also supported the creation of a West Indian Regiment, suggesting that they could be of use in Singapore.

By December 1943, the War Office approved the unit, although they insisted that they would be primarily used for garrison duties, despite the fact that they were officially a combat unit. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Caribbean Regiment was created, notwithstanding reservations of the military value of such a unit, and the Army informed British Commanders that such value needed to be balanced against political considerations. Thus, the history of the Caribbean Regiment would be defined by the fact that it had been born for political reasons rather than military ones. The colour bar to officers' commissions was suspended during the war, thus making it easier for darker-skinned West Indians to achieve a commission, with Joe Moody, born in London to black West Indian parents, achieving the rank of Major in the Caribbean Regiment.

Whilst training in Virginia in the USA in June 1944, the Regiment made its first public appearance during a parade celebrating the King's Birthday and were sent to Italy the following month. However, they were deemed to need another 6 months training before they were ready for combat, and so helped as labourers, being noted for the quick manner in which they successfully loaded bridge equipment, which led to a speedy river crossing, and the rescue of an important ammunition dump from fire. They were then sent to Egypt in October 1944, but matters were not smooth sailing. On Christmas Eve, a white soldier and a black sergeant of the Caribbean Regiment had an altercation in a dance hall over a woman, which led to a fight lasting several hours. The Caribbean Regiment, outnumbered by their opponents, barricaded themselves in an hotel and refused to surrender to the Provost Marshal until an agreement was brokered by the US military police.



Soldiers of the Caribbean Regiment in the Middle East



Training in Egypt

The following day, with the men all back at camp, Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson rebuked his men harshly for their actions, emphasising the damage that had been done to the Regiment's reputation, thus endangering their chance to fight in battle. In the end, the Regiment never did fight in combat, being moved to the desert near the Red Sea; the Army was unable to arrange large formation training for them, which was vital for fighting on the battlefield. However, many campaigned for them to be given a fighting role, arguing that it would have an effect not only on the discipline and morale of the men but would also have political consequences back in the Caribbean. In order to mitigate this, the Middle Eastern Command were asked to make it clear that they regretted that the Regiment had never had the opportunity to fight and that they were returning home with honour.



The other great Caribbean contribution was to the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). This was staffed by women in non-combatant roles to support the War effort; they worked as drivers, clerks, orderlies and nurses. As the war progressed, they were given further responsibilities, serving as military police and as part of anti-aircraft gun crews, although they were officially not allowed to fire the guns. Although glad to welcome white West Indian volunteers, the War Office was initially reluctant to accept black recruits. However, after accidentally accepting Miss L. Curtis, a black Bermudian, who they had originally mistaken as white on her papers, from 1943 volunteers of all colours were happily accepted. By the War's end, half of the 600 ATS volunteers from the Caribbean were black.



West Indian ATS volunteers  
Noelle Thompson, Sonia Thompson, Alma La Badic and  
Sally Lopez in Trafalgar Square

The West India Committee continued to support the West Indian personnel who came to serve in Britain, acting as a place where they could store their belongings and have their post sent, with the Committee arranging to forward it to the camp where they were stationed. It also helped when personnel were on leave, arranging for accommodation, often with a local family, for the ATS volunteers when they wished to travel around the country. Service personnel were also invited to events at the Committee, such as the 'At home' Christmas parties, where some of their number were able to send a radio broadcast back to the Caribbean, thanks to the BBC. The Committee also worked to raise funds to support Caribbean service personnel, including a special showing of *Gone with the Wind* with Princess Margaret in attendance.



The West India Committee Christmas Party  
1944



Jamaican and British Honduran ATS volunteers in  
London

With the end of the Second World War, and the subsequent break-up of the British Empire over the coming decades, the British Army's relationship with the Caribbean would change further, seeing most of the islands becoming independent nations and establishing their own armed forces.