

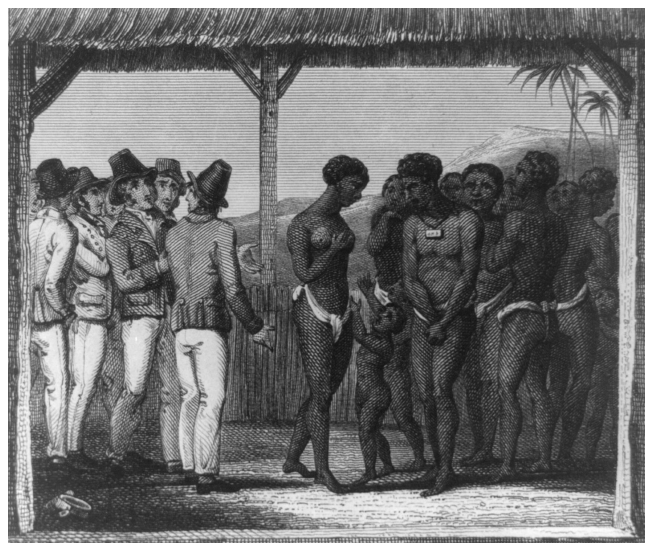
The West India Regiments

By the mid-1790s, the wars with the French in the Caribbean were not going well for Britain and new sources of men were required to help defend the colonies. Issues with recruiting European troops and the high mortality rate amongst them meant that military minds had to consider new options with which to garrison and defend the West Indies. The local white population was not large enough to provide the number of men required, so attention turned to the large black population, mainly comprising slaves. Thus, Lieutenant General Sir John Vaughan proposed that a regiment should be raised composed of black soldiers. Unlike previous black regiments raised in the region, this was not to be a temporary measure but a new, permanent, regular infantry regiment of the British Army. The idea of a permanent corps of black soldiers outside their control horrified the leading figures of the Plantocracy, and their representative body in London, The West India Committee, attempted to use its influence in Government to prevent their formation. However, slave rebellions in both 1794 and 1795, as well as the conflict with the Maroons of Jamaica, coupled with the advice of senior officers who had been stationed in the Caribbean and knew the difficulties of serving there, led Sir Henry Dundas, Secretary of State for War, to approve the formation of two new regiments composed of black soldiers.

It was impossible for these regiments to be formed by volunteers alone, so the decision was taken to purchase slaves from the Caribbean islands to fill the ranks. However, the planters were reluctant to sell their slaves to the Army as they believed that the creation of such regiments would fundamentally undermine and threaten their way of life. Therefore, when they were prepared to sell their slaves, they sold the ones that they considered to be unruly, the ones that would not make disciplined soldiers. Thus, in order to obtain suitable men, the Army mainly chose to buy slaves who had newly arrived in the region from Africa. Agents were employed to acquire them and were given guidelines for what sort of men were desirable, but these could vary in the instructions given from agent to agent. In general, the men were to be in good health and capable of bearing arms, aged between 16 and 22 years old and to be a minimum 5ft, 5ins tall. Agents were awarded contracts, which usually were for the purchase of 200 slaves. A budget was also established, with, normally, the price of slaves not to exceed £62, between £5,742.81 and £7,514.53 in modern money, although the budgeted amount could be much higher. The issue was that the planters, with vast financial resources at their disposal, were willing to pay far more than the Army for a slave - up to £100 each.

Ranger Regiments

The previous slave regiments were known as Ranger Regiments, who were raised in times of desperation and usually commanded by local officers. Ranger Regiments tended only to serve on the island where they were created and slave-owners were paid for the services of their slaves, receiving additional payment if the slave was killed. These Regiments, despite the prejudices of the Plantocracy, were frequently very effective. One of the most famous was raised by Robert Malcolm, who was later referred to as 'the father of the black regiments', even though he had died before the creation of the West India Regiments. Many of the last Ranger Corps to be raised served as the basis from which the new West India Regiments were created. For example, Malcolm's Rangers became part of the 1st West India Regiment, whilst the South American Rangers, raised in such colonies on the Central American Coast as Essequibo, became part of the 11th West India Regiment.



A West Indian slave market

The 'recruits' newly arrived from Africa faced many of the same difficulties that others from this continent faced. They came from different nations or tribes, many of them far from the African coast from which they had sailed, and spoke a variety of languages as a result, with very few knowing any English. This made understanding orders and the training they received very difficult. Despite these initial problems, there were

significant advantages in choosing these newly arrived men. They were, for the most part, hardy, having survived the trials of the 'Middle Passage' across the Atlantic and, unlike the men recruited in the Caribbean, they had no ties to the local population, which arguably made them more likely to enforce order in the region. Some officers of the day went further, claiming that the newly arrived Africans lacked many of the vices that they deemed to be present in the creole slave population and were more orderly and disciplined.



A Private of the 5th West India Regiment

These new regiments quickly proved their worth and, from the initial two regiments founded in 1795, the number rapidly increased in the space of a few short months, eventually reaching a total of twelve. It is estimated that between 1795 and 1808, 13,400 slaves were purchased as recruits for the West India Regiments, which arguably made the Army one of the largest slave owners in recent centuries, although other slave armies throughout history have exceeded this size. It must not be thought that the early West India Regiments were composed of slaves only; there were many free volunteers, not only from the free black and mixed-race populations of the West Indies, but even some whites, including some from England. Although these black soldiers could rise in the non-commissioned ranks, they could not attain a commission and become an officer.

The authorities in London decided that all stations in the British Caribbean would be required to have some black troops, much to the horror of the local legislatures. As a form of reassurance to the higher classes of colonial society, a policy was implemented that an island's garrison should have two white soldiers for each black soldier and the latter would also be frequently moved between islands to prevent them from forming relationships with the local slave population. However, this move did not totally allay the fears of the planters. Nor was it totally successful

in its implementation, with black soldiers outnumbering white soldiers in several posts in the Windward and Leeward Islands.

The 2nd West India Regiment were the first to see combat, against the Caribs and French forces on St. Vincent. Although they were classed as infantry of the line, in the early years, their role went far beyond that. Engaging the enemy in guerrilla warfare in the wooded and hilly interiors of the Caribbean islands, their role was, in truth, much closer to that of Light Infantry. In 1807, sections of the West India Regiments were also trained in the use of artillery, most likely owing to a lack of regular artillerymen. They also served, on occasion, as labour units, a role that they would fulfil periodically for the remainder of their existence. The first battle honour awarded to any West India Regiment was Dominica 1805, when the 1st WIR defended the island. The Regiments continued to serve with distinction until the end of the Napoleonic Wars, participating in campaigns on various French islands, including the final invasion of Guadeloupe in 1815.



The 3rd West India Regiment attacking a bridge on Terre en Haut 1809 Image © National Army Museum, London

Another notable problem during the early years of the Regiments was the mutiny of some soldiers of the 8th West India Regiment at Fort Shirley, Dominica on 9th April 1802. Rumours abounded within the Regiment that it was to be reduced in size and that the excess men were to be sold into slavery. Whilst untrue, several events occurred that convinced some troops that there was truth to this gossip. Firstly, there had been an issue with their pay over the preceding months, not perhaps totally unusual in the Army of the time, but it had lasted long enough to induce worry. Whilst at Fort Shirley, the men were assigned to various labour tasks, again not totally unusual, but they were asked to remove the brush and drain the swamps near the fort, work that was normally given to slaves. To carry out this task, they were each issued with a billhook, a tool used by slaves on plantations. This led to a feeling, confirmed by Private James who testified at the inquiry after the mutiny, that the task of cutting down brush was in fact a test to see if the men could cut sugar cane. The mutiny lasted for three days and was put down by the marines, artillerymen, the local militia and detachments of regular troops, which included men of the 8th West India Regiment who had remained loyal. 3 officers, and several other whites were killed in the disturbance. This led to the disbandment of the 8th and the rearrangement and renumbering of the other West India Regiments. There was another small mutiny by 30 men of 2nd West India Regiment in 1808 at Fort Augusta, Jamaica, which was put down at once by loyal men of the same regiment.

Such mutinies, even though they comprised a small number of men and were successfully suppressed, were cited by the rulers of the Plantocracy as an indication that their fears were right and black soldiers were dangerous, despite the obvious benefits that the Regiments had brought to the region. Colonel Thomas Hislop, writing a series of recommendations on the future of the West India Regiments commented that, *“Whatever prejudices may have existed or may still be entertained, among the Planter or other Residents in the West India Colonies, against the establishment of Black regiments, the utility of them, has in every instance been fully proved.”* Clashes between the Plantocracy and the Army over the use of the West India Regiments would continue for years to come, although some islands warmed to the West India Regiments earlier than others. For instance, in 1800, both the Legislature and the Council of Trinidad unanimously passed motions expressing their gratitude for the service of the Regiments, whilst on Jamaica criticism continued.



The Colours of the 4th West India Regiment
Image © National Army Museum, London

The mutiny of the 8th highlights an issue with the status of the men of the early West India Regiments. Although they had been purchased as slaves, there arose a legal question about whether they remained slaves, and thus remained subject to the local slave laws, or whether they had become free men, albeit bound by the same rules and regulations that governed the lives of other soldiers. There were many reasons why they should feel differently. They were told during their training that they enjoyed a privileged position and they were superior to slaves who worked in the fields. They were given the same uniforms as their white counterparts, received pay and allowances, and were treated in the same hospitals. Their testimony was accepted in military courts, just as a white soldier's would be, something that would have been impossible in a colonial civil court, as slaves were classed as chattels rather than people. Black sergeants were entrusted with the commands of important military posts, without any immediate supervision from white officers.

Although the Army had purchased these men, it also worked hard to ensure that they were protected from the worst aspects of slave society. The local legislatures, particularly as the threat of French invasion lessened, began to try and bring the black soldiers under the local laws governing slaves, which led to certain clashes between

military and civil authorities. Those soldiers who were retired from service, due to illness or injury, were often persecuted, as slave-owners deemed them to be a bad influence on their slaves. Special arrangements were made occasionally; for instance, a merchant was charged with the care of some veterans of the 11th West India Regiment. In 1797, Sir Ralph Abercrombie, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in the West Indies, declared that all soldiers of the West India Regiments, who were deemed unfit for further service, would retire as freemen on a pension of a shilling a day. Whilst this decree was a major argument in support of the idea that these soldiers were free men, Sir Ralph's proclamation was neither condemned nor supported by the authorities in London. As a result, the legislatures of the British Caribbean ignored it whenever possible and continued to treat soldiers and veterans as being subject to local slave laws.

This failure inspired both the Army, and some officials, such as the Duke of Portland, to take further action to protect these ex-servicemen. Legal opinions were sought. The Government's legal officers gave their official opinion on the matter in March 1799, arguing that military service did not free the men from slavery in and of itself, but that an explicit act of manumission was required. Other lawyers disagreed, such as the Attorney General of Antigua, who argued that if a man had been employed as a soldier and paid to that end, then he was free as it was an "*implied or virtual manumission*". Nevertheless, the Government's legal officers maintained their opinion on the matter when they were consulted on a further two occasions. The arguments continued until 1807, when the Mutiny Act of that year, which governed the existence of the Army, deemed that all blacks in the service of the King were free. The act received Royal Assent two days before the Act abolishing the transatlantic slave trade, thus putting the Army at the forefront of abolition. This meant that the 10,000 men of the West India Regiments were undeniably free, 27 years before the slave population of the West Indies as a whole was freed. In the parliamentary debates on the abolition of the slave trade, Lord Hardwicke asked the Prime Minister, Lord Grenville, if the men of the West India Regiment were slaves or freemen. The Prime Minister replied he had always considered them to be free.

Negroes purchased and serving in the Forces, shall be deemed free.	CII. And be it further enacted, That from and after the passing of this Act, all Negroes purchased by or on account of His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, and serving in any of His Majesty's Forces, shall be and be deemed and taken to be free, to all Intents and for all Purposes whatever, in like Manner in every respect as if such Negroes had been born free in any Part of His Majesty's Dominions; and that such Negroes shall also to all Intents and Purposes whatever, be considered as Soldiers having voluntarily enlisted in His Majesty's Service.
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Section CII of the Mutiny Act 1807, declaring all black soldiers serving in the Armed Forces to be free men

With the end of the transatlantic slave trade, the West India Regiments now had to find another source of recruits. As the British Navy started to intercept foreign slave ships leaving the West African coast, the decision was made to recruit from amongst these liberated Africans. This presented its own set of ethical problems, in that enlistment in the West India Regiments remained, in theory, for life. Governor Thomas Perronet Thompson of Sierra Leone, an abolitionist, banned the recruitment of such liberated Africans into military service, as it was still theoretically a lifetime commitment, which was not the case for white soldiers, and possibly those of mixed race. Thus it was, in a sense, a forced slave apprenticeship for those who joined. However, Perronet Thompson was later removed from office and his replacement was ordered to restart the recruitment of liberated Africans, as well as to implement a fair method of encouraging Africans to volunteer. A recruiting depot was established in Sierra Leone in 1812 but only operated for a few years. After this, more and more of the recruits came from the Caribbean.

The effective service of these men in the difficult climate of the Caribbean made the authorities in London believe that they would also be effective in another region where the climate frequently proved lethal to white troops - West Africa, including Sierra Leone. The West India Regiments would divide their times between the Caribbean and West Africa for the remainder of their existence, serving not only as garrison troops but also on military expeditions.