

The West India Regiments garrison

With the West Indies largely at peace following the end of the Napoleonic wars, service in the West India Regiments was largely as garrison troops. Whilst this was usually monotonous, on occasion this involved being called out to assist the militia deal with matters of local unrest, which before 1834, included slave rebellions. They were also called upon to help in the aftermath of various disasters, such as hurricanes, fires or earthquakes.

The principal incident in which the West India Regiments engaged in the suppression of a slave rebellion was Bussa's rebellion, which broke out on Easter Sunday, 14th April 1816 in Barbados. Beginning in St. Philip's parish and named for Bussa, one of its leaders, the rebellion spread through the neighbouring parishes, with the rebels setting fire to plantations and the homes of slave overseers, damaging some 60 estates. When the news reached Bridgetown, the local militia, the 1st West India Regiment and the 15th Regiment of Foot were mobilised. The West India regiment came into contact with the rebels and drove them off, after the rebels had fired upon them. Following this, the rebels were scattered and the militia hunted the rest down, being brutal in their reprisals. For their efforts the West India Regiment earned the thanks of the Barbadian assembly.



The flag of the rebels in Bussa's rebellion

Dealing with unrest was not limited to slave rebellions; it also included the fraught period surrounding the abolition of slavery on 1st August 1834. Tensions ran high throughout the Caribbean, and the Army was prepared to deal with any unrest that might arise. The local authorities on the Cayman Islands, expecting some issues, requested new muskets for their militia. What they received on 4th April 1834 was a visit from Howe Peter Browne, Marquess of Sligo and Governor of Jamaica, the first visit by a Governor to Cayman, and twenty troops from the 2nd West India Regiment. The presence of the soldiers, however, increased tensions, as the Caymanians were not used to having British troops stationed on the island, let alone black troops and there were several clashes between the soldiery and the civilians. In one instance, one Richard Phelan argued with and abused Private Rafferty, calling him a "Damn Affrican Negro Barbarian" and physically assaulted him. Rafferty defended himself and beat Phelan, but was later badly assaulted by a man called Richard Parsons who in addition to insulting the local magistrates, the soldiers and King William, also threatened to "Kill all the damn Negro soldiers" which almost led to a fight between soldiers and civilians, but was prevented by the local magistrates and the commanding Lieutenant. Other incidents also occurred during their stay and the locals accused them of crimes of rape and theft, petitioning, unsuccessfully, for their removal.

The Morant Bay Rebellion

Paul Bogle, a Baptist preacher who protested against the continuing racial inequalities in Jamaican society, led a crowd to the court house at Morant Bay, Jamaica on 11th October 1865. The crowd attacked the local militia, who retaliated. Many buildings were set on fire and there were deaths amongst both the authorities and the protesters. It was widely believed that Bogle was trying to begin a general uprising that was aimed at removing Jamaica's white population and those who otherwise disagreed with them, with their rallying cry said to be 'colour for colour and blood for blood'. The violence spread in the following days and Governor Eyre was criticised for his brutal reaction by some and hailed by others. He was replaced as Governor but was never brought to trial for his actions despite the desires of some. Paul Bogle was executed in the aftermath and is now recognised as a National Hero of Jamaica, alongside George William Gordon, a member of the Jamaican Assembly that Eyre had tried and executed under Martial Law, as he believed Gordon had encouraged the rebellion.

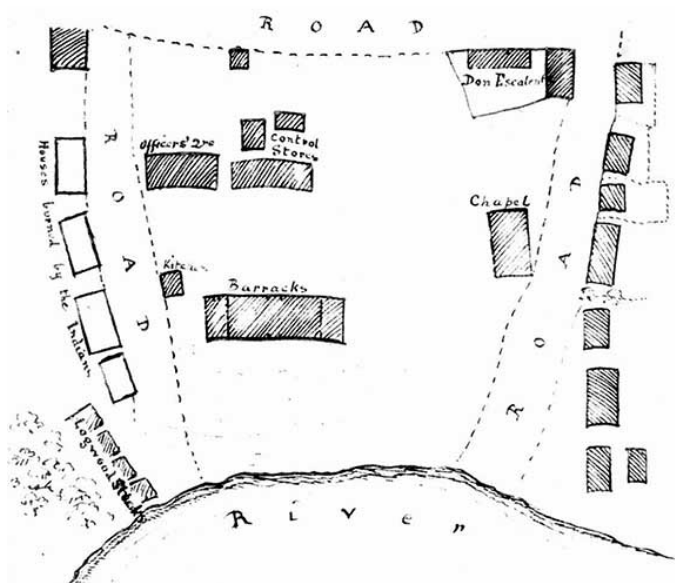
Another incident involving public unrest with which the West India Regiment found themselves involved was the infamous Morant Bay Rebellion. Martial law was declared and regiments stationed all over Jamaica sent troops to the affected area to restore order. This response proved particularly brutal, with soldiers carrying

out summary executions and setting fire to homes and other property. Amongst these incidents was the march of a detachment of the 1st West India Regiment and some men of the 6th Regiment of Foot from Port Antonio to Manchioneal, a distance of some twenty miles; this was noted for its particularly brutality, with Ensign Cullen, commanding the West India Regiment detachment, accused of having three men shot at Duckinfield Suspension Bridge and his accompanying Surgeon Morris accused of shooting a fourth. Major Ellis later noted in his history of the 1st West India Regiment that, *"Nine-tenths of those men were Jamaicans, born and bred, and in the work of suppressing the rebellion they were required to hang, capture, and destroy the habitations of not only their countrymen and friends, but, in many instances, of their near relatives. Yet in no single case did any man hesitate to obey orders, nor was the loyalty of any one soldier ever a matter for doubt."* Both Cullen and Morris were court-martialled for their actions on the march to Manchioneal but neither were convicted. The 2nd West India Regiment was brought from Barbados to Jamaica as reinforcements and stayed for some time until the authorities felt order had been restored.

Whilst matters in the islands were largely confined to garrison duties and incidents of local unrest, for those of the West India Regiments stationed in British Guiana and British Honduras, modern day Guyana and Belize, there were occasional clashes with external powers. In one instance in 1842, a detachment of the 1st West India Regiment had a difficult journey up the Essequibo and Rypmani rivers in British Guiana to reach the village of Pirara, where some Brazilians had been encroaching on British territory. It took them over a month to reach Pirara, arriving on 13th February and they successfully expelled the Brazilians.

In 1866, the 4th West India Regiment was sent to British Honduras, where they were required to help deal with an incident of woodcutters near the colony's northern border being harassed by Icaiche Maya. This was the result of years of ongoing border disputes, and the Icaiche Maya had even occupied the town of San Pedro and made demands for rent of the land and for ransom. Commissioner Edward Rhys and 142 men of the 4th Regiment were sent to negotiate with Icaiche leader Marcus Canul. Whilst marching to San Pedro on 20th December, less than a mile from the village, they came under attack from the Icaiche. Having marched overnight through terrible weather and mud, the 4th put up a spirited defence, but were ordered by commanding officer Major McKay to withdraw, leaving behind four dead and Commissioner Rhys missing, never to be seen again. Another expeditionary force, including men of the 3rd and 4th West India Regiments and the Royal Artillery searched for two months for the Icaiche but they had withdrawn over the border to Mexico.

A postscript to the San Pedro incident took place at Orange Walk, British Honduras, where a party of Icaiche Indians under Canul's command crossed the River Hondo and entered British territory. Orange Walk, although now a large town, was then a small village, with a small detachment of thirty-eight men of the 1st West India Regiment serving as garrison. In the early morning of 1st September 1872, 180 fighting men, supported by 100 camp followers, drew near to the small military outpost and took the West India Regiment by surprise. The two officers of the detachment, Lieutenant Joseph Graham Smith and Staff-Assistant-Surgeon John Dallas Edge were caught having their morning baths and had to run a distance of 40 feet to reach the relative safety of the barracks; Smith was at least able to don a pair of trousers for the dash, but Edge had to make the run naked. The men had begun defending the barracks, but in order to re-supply them, Smith and Sergeant Edward Belizario, had to retrieve the key for the ammunition box from Smith's quarters in another building; they succeeded without injury, despite heavy enemy fire. Belizario then managed to run to the guard room and retrieve the ammunition box, but it was too heavy to drag back to the barracks and he showed great bravery in passing packets of ammunition under the eaves of the barracks roof to his comrade, all the while exposed to enemy fire.



A map of the barracks at Orange Walk, 1872

Smith was badly wounded whilst defending the West Door of the barracks and Edge was forced to assume command, ably assisted by Sergeant Belizario. The battle continued for several hours, with the defenders being joined by the local police Magistrate and two of his constables, as well as by two American gentlemen from a nearby ranch. At one point the defenders started a fire, which set several buildings in the compound alight, but fortunately the barracks remained untouched. The Icaiche attack began to lessen around 13:30 and they had totally withdrawn by 14:00. Over the course of six hours fighting, Marcus Canul was mortally wounded and 50 Icaiche had been killed. On the side of the West India Regiments, Privates Lynch and Bidwell had died, with Smith and fourteen others severely wounded. One civilian, a 14-year-old boy, had also been killed and several others injured. The detachment patrolled the area for the next three days, keeping a watch for another potential attack, until a relief party finally arrived at midnight on the 4th. The action at Orange Walk has drawn certain comparisons with the famous defence of Rourke's Drift, although no Victoria Crosses were granted. Sergeant Belizario was, however, given the sum of £10 a year and the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his actions. Lance-Corporals Spencer and Stirling were also given promotions to full corporal, as well as the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Smith and Edge were also promoted.

Natural disasters with which the West India Regiments had to deal included fires; they helped in extinguishing the blaze, rescuing property and in keeping civil order and calm. In the extensive fires that broke out in Kingston, Jamaica on Saturday 25th August 1843, the 2nd West India Regiment were noted for the *"sense of cheerfulness, activity and well-directed exertions, evinced by them during a protracted and laborious period of severe fatigue."* However, such tasks were by no means free from risk; in the fire that broke out in Belize in 18th July 1854 many of the men were severely burned, with Lance Corporal William Maturin dying of his injuries. A fire killed twenty-four men of the Regiment in the hospital of Up Park Camp when an earthquake struck Kingston on 14th January 1907, which also caused severe damage to the rest of the camp. The earthquake, which killed over a thousand people in total, also killed two officers of the Regiment and wounded seventeen more, with another eighty wounded amongst the rank and file. Some of these also later died of their wounds, but it was noted that despite the devastation, the regiment managed to maintain military routine. In Kingston itself, the Regiment worked to remove the bodies of the dead, calm the people and whatever else they could.



The ruined church at Up Park Camp, 1907

Although the Regiments were largely viewed positively in the Caribbean, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were occasionally tensions and incidents of unrest. This included the events of 9th June 1894, when some 50 men of A company of the unified West India Regiment's 2nd battalion, under the lead of Corporal Philips smashed the windows of two police stations in Kingston, Jamaica, with two constables and a police inspector injured during the riot. The whole incident was over in the space of two hours, when other men of the battalion were sent to bring the rioters back. The Governor of Jamaica declared the whole episode the result of a few men's foolish actions. Another notable incident occurred in Belize in August 1920. This was linked to the sighting of a man in strange clothing, who civilians believed was a soldier. Civilians began to abuse the soldiers with insulting language. Matters turned violent and a civilian was injured. The next evening some of the Regiment went into town armed with sticks, to intimidate the civilians, travelling around in groups and using whistle calls to communicate. This did not stop several civilians jeering at them and over the next few days Captain Sharp, criticising the men under his command for their actions, restricted their ability to go into town. Notices were also placed around town warning civilians that they would be arrested for making *"insulting and provoking remarks"*.

Despite these incidents, and the role that they played in the suppression of slave rebellions and incidents like the Morant Bay Rebellion, the West India Regiments were a source of Caribbean pride until they were disbanded.