

Conclusion

The West Indian soldier has been through many permutations over the course of the last 400 years; conqueror, coloniser and defender. British soldiers serving in the Caribbean made great sacrifices, to further British interests in the region, despite the difficulties posed by climate, disease and war amongst unfamiliar terrain. Many did not survive the experience. The conquest, return and reconquest of the various islands of the region also helped to shape local identities thanks to exposure to the varying cultures of conquering powers. The wars fought in the Caribbean throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the conquests arising thereof, had widespread repercussions, as European empires scrambled for position, each aiming to put themselves in the strongest possible position for inevitable peace negotiations.

The British Army's presence in the region presents an interesting dichotomy. On one hand the Army helped maintain the unsavoury aspects of past Caribbean society, being required to put down slave rebellions and later uprisings and through the act of purchasing slaves to serve as both labourers and soldiers. Yet at the same time, the Army was also at the forefront of social change in the region, treating the men that it purchased as slaves as free men like any other in British Uniform and seeking to protect their welfare against those that would return them into bondage, and the accounts written by the soldiers who visited the region encouraged many in Britain to support abolition. Service in the islands' militias also provided an engine of change, slowly helping those at the lower end of the Caribbean's colour-based caste system seize their freedom and rights.

As West Indians themselves joined the regular Army, they demonstrated their capacity as warriors, serving with distinction not only in the Caribbean but in Africa, on the fields of Waterloo and in the East Indies. At the forefront of this was the West India Regiments; despite the occasional naysayer, their actions, helped further Britain's foreign and colonial policies, as well as lend civil aid in the Caribbean in both natural disasters, and controversial events such as the Morant Bay Rebellion. The efforts of these men, coupled with the traditions developed by the local militias, helped the Caribbean shape its own military identity in the same Creole fashion as wider society in the region, which is still preserved today by the defence forces of the now independent former colonies. In the twentieth century, despite the damage done to the Caribbean public's perception of the British Army due to the experiences of the British West Indies Regiment in the First World War, a certain affection was still held for the West India Regiments. The experiences of many West Indian veterans from the world wars were also instrumental in informing their policies and actions as they became political leaders and steered many of their countries towards independence from Britain.

Today, the historical bonds continue to flourish with West Indian recruits in the British Army, and the assistance provided by the Army to the Caribbean in the form of disaster relief, training and partnership. With two new territorial regiments recently being created in the British Overseas Territories of the Cayman Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands, and the prospect of a branch of The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst being established in Jamaica, the British Army continues to evolve in the region, and with it the story of the West Indian Soldier.