

# The Militias of the West Indies

The early colonies in the West Indies did not have the constant protection of the British Army or Navy and thus needed a local defence force to protect themselves against external threats; there was a danger of incursions from such foreign powers as the Spanish or French or even raids by pirates, as well as issues of local unrest. The inhabitants chose to establish local, part-time military units, based on the militias that existed back in Britain. The closest analogy to these units in modern Britain is the Army Reserve or the National Guard in the USA. Each parish in the West Indies had its own militia regiment. The militias of the British Caribbean were the main defensive force of the islands until the second half of the eighteenth century, when more regular British troops began to be stationed in the region and reflected the increasing professionalisation of warfare. Although primarily meant to serve as defensive units, occasionally the militias of the Caribbean did serve as offensive troops, lending aid to other British Caribbean islands or assisting the British regulars during invasions.

The rules for eligibility of militia service varied from island to island, as well as changing over time. Generally, however, free able-bodied white men aged between 16 and 65 were required to serve. As indicated by this rule, service in the militia was linked to the racial hierarchy of the Caribbean and several colonies placed restrictions on non-whites joining at various junctures in their history. However, as time went by, these restrictions were eased, as the white element became a small proportion of the overall West Indian population, which would have severely limited the pool of men eligible for service. Those men deemed free-coloured, made up of free blacks and those of mixed race, were thus required to serve. However, people of colour were generally prevented from becoming militia officers, although the various caste systems that operated throughout the region may have led to those with African ancestry being accepted into more senior ranks.

People of colour were also required to serve in segregated companies, that often separated those of mixed race from black servicemen; this reflected the stratification of Caribbean creole society that relied heavily on the caste systems determined on each island that were often enshrined in law during this period. Over time, and in line with the changing racial demographics of the region, such free black and mixed-race men became the majority in the militias. The racial divide also extended to the Jewish population, who again were similarly required to serve in their own companies. Despite the segregation within the militia, for many amongst the free coloured population their service demonstrated an ascendancy within the social hierarchy, particularly if they had previously been enslaved. It could also serve as a way of securing more rights for themselves; between 1796 and 1830, the loyal service that the free-coloured companies on Jamaica demonstrated during various conflicts and uprisings led to the gradual repeal of legislation known as the Disabling Acts, which had denied them certain rights and privileges. Such men wrote to the Jamaican Assembly in 1823 to indicate that, although they now formed the larger part of the Jamaican militia, the fact they had not encouraged or participated in an overthrow of the social order proved their *“loyalty and devotion to the British crown and government; for, what else could induce submission”*.

The extent of a man's property could also influence what they were expected to contribute to the militia. In Barbados, those who had estates of 30 acres or more, or whose houses were valued at more than £100, were obliged to send billeted men to serve in the militia. In some instances, it was also mandatory to send an armed, trusted slave. Slaves were not often required to serve in the militia, as the Plantocracy feared the consequences of teaching slaves how to fight, in case it led to a revolt, and indeed the practice was banned in several islands after slave rebellions. Yet it was not an uncommon practice for militiamen to bring a slave with them to fetch and carry both arms and ammunition for their masters.



A Jamaica Militia shoulder belt plate  
Image © National Army Museum, London

There were three aspects of the militias: infantry, cavalry and artillery. The infantry were by far the most numerous of the three branches, especially owing to the high cost of maintaining a horse in the Caribbean in centuries gone by. The militia regiments were structured in much the same manner as those of a regular Army unit and of militias in Britain. They were commanded by officers, the highest of which was normally a Colonel, under the authority of a local Commander-in-Chief or the Captain-General of a colony, the latter role normally an office also held by the local Governor. A frequent criticism of militias, both in Britain and the Caribbean, was that obtaining a commission was often the result of wealth and nepotism. The richest and most influential planters frequently obtained the highest commissions, which led to several of them styling themselves 'Colonel' for the rest of their lives and, in some instances, they were even able to secure the rank of General, although Colonel was usually the highest rank available in a militia. These ranks provided a certain amount of prestige which was also the case in Britain, most popularly illustrated by the reaction of the younger Bennet sisters to the presence of the militia in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

However, it was such practices favouring the higher echelons of society that inhibited the efficiency of the militias in the British West Indies, particularly as they became more widespread over the course of the eighteenth century. The commanding roles were secured by men who were more concerned with the social status conferred, rather than the effective operation of the militia. Many of the most successful planters, who so often held the very highest ranks, chose to leave their holdings in the Caribbean in the care of managers and went to live in Britain, leaving the militias lacking direction from those who should have been providing it. Some militias only survived thanks to the efforts of veteran soldiers, who served in the militias in their retirement, and the occasional enthusiastic volunteer, who prevented a total collapse in standards and practices.



A Jamaica Light Horse uniform,  
belonging to  
Isaac Gomez Da Costa  
Image © National Army Museum,  
London

In addition to the issues of leadership, or perhaps because of them, there were many other problems with the militias. As irregular units, they were assembled only infrequently. In theory, there were a set number of days a month for training and drill, as well as an annual camp when all the different militia regiments of an island were assembled for group training. Wide variations in both standards and competency in the field were evident. The proficiency of the men in firing their muskets was often questionable, but, in the case of the cavalry, the reliability of their horses was frequently problematic, and it was not uncommon for the horses to bolt at the sound of a volley of gunfire, as they had not been trained to stand their ground. Often, when militias did parade for reviews, they were frequently viewed by the locals as a source of amusement owing to the often-poor performance of the troops. There were also issues with arms, as the men frequently had to provide their own, which again led to widely varying standards. It was also a complaint amongst the poorer residents of the islands that, even though they were still liable for militia service, they were unable to purchase the necessary equipment. The distances between some locales in many parishes in the West Indies made it difficult to assemble the militia for training, and annual camps, especially in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, turned into primarily social gatherings.

The problem of poor leadership and training was exacerbated by the many exemptions allowed for not attending training or the like, and by the minimal punishments that were handed out to those who did not have the requisite permission. Despite the prestige that an officer's rank bestowed, service in the militia was widely unpopular amongst men of all fortunes. The call to muster interrupted the men's daily lives, and was very disruptive for those who were business owners or ran plantations, particularly if there was an extended period of Martial Law. Amongst those of the higher classes, who were not attracted to the social prestige that officer rank conferred, some acquired exemption from militia duty through holding certain official positions, which were deemed sufficiently important to excuse them. However, influence and nepotism again ran deep, and many of those seeking to avoid militia duty secured positions that, in fact, were purely nominal.





Martial Law in Jamaica by Abraham James,  
a satirical look at the local militia

The issues with the West Indian militias in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries resulted in the officers and men of the regular Army having a low opinion of the irregulars, which led to tensions between the two. The scorn with which the militias were viewed also extended to British officials, leading Sir Lionel Smith, the Governor of Barbados between 1833-1836, to comment that, *"The... militia throughout the West Indies is disgraceful. I use a strong term because there is no just excuse for want of men or means, and I can only attribute the defect to apathy or to a mistaken confidence that they can always command the services of the regular troops."* However, such views were not always universal and some militias were viewed as being better than others, with the Barbadian militia, in particular, gaining praise. The Barbadian militia came to the aid of their counterparts on St. Kitts in 1666 and 1667. Units from the militias of Barbados and the Leeward Islands accompanied the English Army during the Nine Years War, when the Antiguans saw some particularly brutal fighting, and a number of volunteers accompanied the British during the invasions of Martinique and Guadeloupe in the Seven Years War. The St. Kitts militia also stood with the British regulars in the defence of Brimstone Hill in 1782, fighting courageously, although some did choose to desert. On at least one occasion, in 1744 during the War of the Austrian Succession, a local militia became a primary invading force, when Deputy Governor Arthur Hodge of Anguilla led his volunteers to neighbouring St. Martin and captured the French side of the island. This militia also single-handedly repelled a much larger French force that landed on Anguilla in the same year.

As slavery became more widespread throughout the Caribbean, the local militias were called upon, in addition to the regular troops that were stationed in the region, to put down slave rebellions. These suppressions were frequently brutal, with the militia often noted for their cruelty in the aftermath. Sir Lionel also observed that, *"the militia in these islands are so violent and cruel against the slaves, that they should be employed only in the last extremity."* The increasingly important role that the free-coloured and free blacks took in the militia did not ameliorate this treatment. Rear Admiral Harvey noted in the aftermath of Bussa's Rebellion in Barbados in 1816, *"The Militia, who could not be restrained by the same discipline as the Troops, put many Men, Women, & Children to Death, I fear without much discrimination"* Although there were instances in which some of the free black and free coloured members joined slave conspiracies, these were rare and some slave conspiracies



targeted such men alongside the white population. The Christmas period was considered to be a dangerous time, with the slave population emboldened by the celebrations. Thus, Martial Law was frequently declared at this time to allow the militia and whatever regular troops that were stationed on the island to control the situation.

### **Martial Law**

In times of crisis, countries around the world have declared periods of Martial Law, which is defined as a period of temporary rule by military authorities until the crisis has ended. Although the exact effects have varied from country to country, it usually means the suspension of normal civil rights and that the entire area affected is instead ruled by Martial Law. An example of this would be that instead of a normal trial, with a jury, there would be a court martial, at which a panel of military officers would rule in place of the judge. Summary military justice without trial may also be utilised, depending on the exact rules governing Martial Law. It frequently involves imposing restrictive conditions on civilian life, frequently enforcing a curfew, and the mobilisation of reserve troops, such as a militia. In the West Indies in previous centuries, this was invoked during times of war when there was the threat of an invasion, or during widespread civil unrest, such as a slave rebellion, or even when there was a perceived threat of such an event. In some instances, Martial Law is declared by the military in a bid to take control of the government of a country.

Following the abolition of slavery, the higher echelons of West Indian society were anxious to keep the newly-emancipated men out of the militia, again fearing that their membership would encourage social unrest and uprisings. They achieved their aims by introducing property requirements for militia eligibility, which of course were greater than that which could have been possibly owned by recently emancipated slaves. Laws were also passed prohibiting anyone who was not a member of the militia from owning firearms, replicating previous laws which had banned slaves from owning such weapons.



The Trinidad Militia Volunteers (c.1850-1900)

Image © National Army Museum, London

By the end of the nineteenth century, when there

was mainly peace throughout the Caribbean and the militias had not been called upon to defend the British islands for many years, service in the militias became less constrained and, although not completely rescinded, the restrictions regarding race had been relaxed. The diminishing need for militias for defence meant that they were gradually disbanded. Their remnants metamorphosed into local defence forces and volunteer regiments, more akin to the reserve services that are known today, which many former militiamen chose to join. A number of these later developed into the modern local Defence Forces, which today protect the now independent nations of the former British West Indies as their professional military bodies. Thus, these modern units can trace their heritage and practices back to these original militias of the Caribbean islands.



Infantry of the Barbados Volunteer Force (1902-1909)

Image © National Army Museum, London