

# To the Modern Day



The Coat of Arms of the West Indies Federation

Following the end of the war, a new polity was planned: to form a West Indies Federation to unite the British Caribbean colonies, with the aim that it would become an independent state. In 1956, although plans had begun 9 years earlier, the British Parliament passed the Caribbean Federation Act and, on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1958, the West Indies Federation came into existence. To act as a military force for this new state, the West India Regiments were resurrected, foregoing the Zouave uniform for modern uniforms, with men being recruited from across the Caribbean for its three battalions. Yet, the West Indies Federation was ultimately doomed to failure, with certain issues between the members being too great to overcome. Following a referendum on membership in September 1961, Jamaica opted to become an independent nation, doing so the following year. Shortly after the Jamaican withdrawal from the Federation, Trinidad and Tobago opted to follow suit, becoming independent the same year.

With the two 'pillars' of the Federation opting to leave, it was decided to bring the whole endeavour to an end, and the West Indies Act of May 1962 officially dissolved the Federation. The West India Regiment was disbanded again on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1962. However, the remnants of the Regiment would become part of the new defence forces of Jamaica and Trinidad. The Jamaica Defence Force was founded with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> battalions of the West India Regiment at its core when it came into existence on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1962. The band of the original West India Regiment had survived the dissolution in 1927 and had been renamed the Jamaica Military Band, which too became part of the Jamaica Defence Force. The JDF now upholds many of the traditions of the West India Regiment and, by extension, the British Army. Now headquartered in Up Park Camp, the Defence Force's museum is home to many artefacts of the West India Regiments, including much of the regimental silver and William Gordon's Victoria Cross. The Band still maintains the traditional Zouave Uniform of the West India Regiments, as does the band of the Barbados Defence Force, the island being traditionally associated with the 2<sup>nd</sup> West India Regiment. The Barbados Defence Force was established on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1979 and is based at St. Ann's Fort in Barbados Garrison Savannah, another former British military site.

The demise of the British Empire and the West Indies Federation also led to another British military option in the region, during the events of the Anguillian Revolution of 1967. The islands of St. Kitts, Nevis and Anguilla had been in an administrative union since 1825, though never really with full Anguillian consent owing to concerns over a lack of representation in government. This union was set to continue as the island became a unified, independent state. However, the Anguillians were unwilling to remain in it; some favoured their own independence whilst others wished to remain associated with Britain, the majority favouring the latter. Nevertheless, the Government of St. Kitts was determined to keep Anguilla as part of their union, which ultimately led to Anguilla expelling all Kittfonian representatives from their island. Britain attempted to mediate between the two sides, whilst St. Kitts set up their own professional defence force. The situation was largely mishandled by the British Government, resulting in the expulsion of British minister William Whitelock by the revolutionaries after he had snubbed the members of the Anguillian Council.



The badge of the JDF  
Image © National Army Museum, London



A member of the Jamaica Military Band

Following this, and operating under some fundamental misconceptions, like the revolutionaries were under the control of organised crime elements from America, the Army was dispatched to land on the island. This led to widespread international condemnation, although some on Anguilla itself had actually encouraged the British to send troops. On 19<sup>th</sup> March 1969, some 135 paratroopers landed on the island as part of Operation Sheepskin, taking control of the territory, with no shots fired either by soldiers or revolutionaries. It was soon discovered that the situation on Anguilla was far less volatile than had been reported. A new political settlement was reached, with St. Kitts and Nevis becoming an independent nation and Anguilla remaining to this day a British Overseas Territory. Before they departed, the Army assisted with building new infrastructure on the island, including a new jetty at Road Bay as well as the construction of The Valley Primary School, which opened in 1970.



British soldiers in Anguilla  
19<sup>th</sup> March 1969

The British Army has continued to maintain links with the Caribbean defence forces; in some cases British officers have been seconded to serve in them, whilst retired British officers have been offered and accepted positions. Some defence forces are in partnership with British Army Regiments; for example, both the Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force and the JDF have partnerships with the Mercian Regiment, who are the successors of the former 38<sup>th</sup> and 49<sup>th</sup> Regiments of Foot. The 38<sup>th</sup> spent many years in Antigua, whilst the 49<sup>th</sup> was originally formed in Jamaica. In addition, many of the defence forces of the Caribbean send their officer cadets to Britain for training at Sandhurst's Royal Military Academy. The Army is also planning on opening a branch of the Academy in the Caribbean in the near future, to provide such training closer to home.

The British Army continues to recruit from the Caribbean, with citizens from Commonwealth Countries, such as the former British West Indian Islands, being eligible to join. Over the years the Army has run many recruitment drives in the region, with six weeks in Belize, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines producing 600 volunteers, 187 of which were eventually accepted. In recent years, the British Army has been increasing the number of Commonwealth Nationals with specialist skills permitted to join the Army every year. A certain number of years' service gives such servicemen and women the right to stay in Britain, provided they complete the necessary application. The most famous servicemen of Caribbean origin in recent years is Victoria Cross winner Johnson Beharry from Grenada.

The Army itself continues to maintain a presence in the region, despite the independence of many of the islands from Britain. The Army, and the other British armed forces frequently provide relief and aid in the aftermath of natural disasters, such as during Operation Ruman in the aftermath of 2017's Hurricane Irma - the strongest storm on record in the Caribbean. This aid has come in the form of supplies and such basic necessities as tents and blankets for those who have lost their homes, but the Royal Engineers have also helped to repair the damage to important local infrastructure, such as roads or airports. This includes providing support to the five British Overseas Territories in the region. The Army also continues to train in the Caribbean, principally in Jamaica and Belize.

Some of the newest units of the British Army were formed in the Caribbean in 2020; the Cayman Islands Regiment and the Turks and Caicos Regiment are two new territorial regiments which serve in their respective British Overseas Territories. Recruits are expected to attend training every few weeks, as well as an annual camp, much as their predecessors in the militias did centuries before. These new regiments have a lot in common with the local Defence Forces, primarily focussing on matters relating to disaster relief and security, rather than combat operations.

The badge of the Turks and Caicos Regiment,  
courtesy of the College of Arms



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