

# The West Indian Soldier

## The West India Regiments

The West India Regiments were founded in 1795, to better protect the Caribbean. Most of these soldiers were originally purchased as slaves. However, the Army worked hard to ensure that they were treated equally to any other British soldier, defending their rights against those who wished to return them to slavery. An Act of Parliament in 1807 declared all soldiers in the King's Service to be free men, becoming law shortly before the act that abolished the slave trade the same year.

Having fought with distinction in the Napoleonic Wars, the Regiments divided their time between the Caribbean and Africa until they were disbanded in 1927. In Africa, they fought in numerous conflicts such as the five wars against the Ashanti Confederacy. They became a symbol of pride in the Caribbean.

## The First World War

During the First World War, over 15,000 West Indians volunteered to serve as part of the British West Indies Regiment, a new corps established in 1915 especially for the war. Some of these men served with distinction in Egypt, Palestine and what is now Israel, fighting against the Ottoman Empire.

Others served in Europe as Labour Battalions, responsible for transporting ammunition and other supplies vital to the war effort. This was tough, demanding work, carried out in dangerous circumstances.

The men of the older West India Regiment continued to serve in Africa, fighting in both East and West Africa against German colonial forces.



The British West Indies Regiment in the Middle East

## The British Army in the Caribbean

The Wars fought in Europe in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries between the British, Dutch, French and Spanish were also fought between their colonies in the Caribbean. These included such conflicts as the Nine Years War (1688-1697), the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714), the War of the Austrian Succession (1739-1748), the Seven Years War (1756-1763), the American Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1776-1782), and the French Revolution (1793-1815).

The repeated conquests of various islands in the Caribbean and contributed to the development of the region's unique creole cultures as different islands changed hands many times during the conflicts. Although this happened to many islands, such as Guadeloupe and Martinique, St. Lucia changed hands some fourteen times over the course of 150 years.

## West Indians and the British Army Today

West Indians continue to join the Army today from the English speaking Commonwealth countries of the Caribbean, the British Caribbean Overseas Territories and the Caribbean Community in Britain. The two newest West Indian Regiments in the British Army are the Turks & Caicos Islands Regiment and the Cayman Islands Regiment.

## West Indian Victoria Crosses

Several West Indians have received the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest award for valour. Amongst their number is Sergeant William James Gordon from Jamaica. In 1892, at Toniataba on the River Gambia, West Africa, Gordon saved his superior officer's life by pushing him out of the way of enemy gunfire and being wounded himself in the process. The most recent West Indian to be awarded a Victoria Cross is Johnson Beharry from Grenada, for his actions in Iraq in 2004, where he successfully rescued his comrades on two occasions from enemy ambushes, being wounded in the process.



Johnson Beharry  
Photograph by Russel Meiklejohn  
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## West Indian Bandsmen

West Indians were much in demand as musicians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; they communicated orders on the battlefield. Some of these bandsmen served in the most famous campaigns and battles in British military history, including the Battle of Waterloo. Many settled in Britain and became part of the country's early Caribbean community.

Those West Indian bandsmen serving in the Guards regiments in London were dressed in distinctive costumes, evocative of those worn by bandsmen in the Turkish Ottoman Empire.

## West Indian Uniforms

The West India Regiments are famous for wearing a Zouave uniform, first worn by French troops from Algeria in North Africa. They first adopted the uniform in 1858 as traditional British Army uniforms were not suited to the hot climates in which they served.

Although they adopted the Khaki worn by the rest of the British Army at the end of the nineteenth century, the Zouave uniform was retained by the regimental band and is still used today by the bands of the Jamaica and Barbados Defence Forces.

## The Second World War

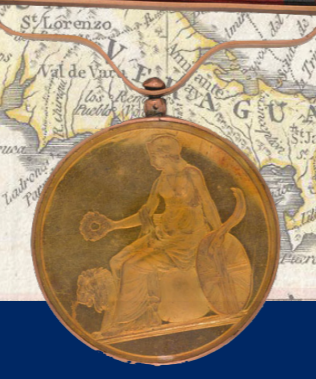
A short lived Caribbean Regiment existed in the Second World War, but never saw combat. Many West Indians contributed in other ways, joining several other Regiments, with a large contingent in the Royal Engineers. Many Caribbean women also volunteered to come to Britain to serve as part of the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), supporting the war efforts as drivers, clerks, orderlies, military police and members of anti-aircraft gun crews.



West Indians ATS volunteers in London



Medal for service on East and West Africa  
Guadeloupe 1810  
Image © National Army Museum, London



The Victoria Cross,  
for valour



British War Medal  
1914-18



Victory Medal  
1914-18

