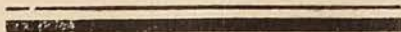


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A FEW NOTES ON THE
**HISTORY OF THE BRITISH
WEST INDIES REGIMENT.**

BY

Lt.-Col. C. Wood-Hill, D.S.O.



The contents are not for publication, and these notes are only intended for those who are interested in the Regiment.

A FEW NOTES ON THE
History of the British West Indies Regiment,

—BY—

LT.-COL. WOOD-HILL, D.S.O.,

COMMANDING 1ST BRITISH WEST INDIES REGIMENT.

It is almost unnecessary to state that the West Indian Colonies are admittedly some of the most loyal and devoted members of the Empire. On the outbreak of war, there was a great desire throughout the West Indies to participate in the struggle, and various offers of Contingents were refused by the War Office; but nothing daunted, individual West Indians paid their passage from the West Indies and joined up in British Regiments, and their numbers were considerable. In addition, various gifts of money for the Red Cross, Aeroplanes, etc., poured in from all sources.

As the war progressed, it became apparent that it would be a long one and the man-power question became acute. Eventually, the War Office accepted Contingents of men from the West Indies and the British West Indies Regiment was brought into being by Royal Charter. Unfortunately, the West Indian Colonies in accordance with their policy and tradition of the past, could not agree on the preliminary spade work of the formation of the British West Indies Regiment. It was suggested in certain quarters, that contingents should be raised in the various Islands and formed into Service Battalions of the West India Regiment, but this plan was opposed by the Governors of Demerara and Trinidad.

The First Contingent to be sent to England was made up of men from Demerara, Trinidad, Grenada and St. Lucia. They were accompanied by their own Officers, and not long after their arrival in England at Seaford, Colonel A. E. Barchard, late of the West India Regiment, was appointed to command, and the 1st Battalion, British West Indies Regiment, came into being. Further Contingents from St. Lucia, Barbados and the Southern Islands went home to England in the Autumn of 1915. The First Jamaica Contingent which was mostly made up of Jamaicans with roughly 240 men from the Bahamas and British Honduras, arrived in England about the same time; and the 2nd Battalion, British West Indies Regiment was brought into being. Colonel B. Faunce, also of the

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West India Regiment, was appointed to command. The winter in England, especially to men from the Tropics, made serious training quite impossible. The men were housed in huts, which in Summer time might have proved suitable, but in Winter, when there was so much rain and damp—and the huts themselves hastily knocked up, as admissions to hospital proved, these huts were almost death-traps. The sickness was so terrible that the hospitals in the locality were filled to overflowing and the entire life and training of these two Battalions paralysed thereby.

The Second Contingent, composed almost wholly of Jamaicans with a sprinkling of men from Bocas-del-Toro, under the command of Lieut.Colonel C. Wood Hill, arrived in England early in January, 1916, and formed the 3rd Battalion, British West Indies Regiment, and were stationed at Withnoe Camp, Plymouth. This Camp was composed entirely of huts, and the men suffered from the cold just as much as those at Seaford. As soon as possible, I went up to London and saw Colonel Sir Edward Ward, Bart., who was acting Laison Officer between the War Office and the Colonial Office, with reference to the Overseas Forces, and implored him to bring pressure to bear to have the British West Indies Regiment removed from England as soon as possible to some warmer place where the men could start training in earnest and where there would be less wastage from disease. Within three weeks of this application, the 1st and 2nd Battalions were removed to Egypt, followed by the 3rd. Unfortunately, misfortune still followed in their wake, for various outbreaks of measles, mumps and cerebro-spinal meningitis occurred. The 3rd Battalion was especially unfortunate with respect to this latter disease, for they were stationed in a camp at Plymouth in which there had been an outbreak of this disease before and within a few yards of their camp there was another camp in which some British troops were suffering from mumps.

Before proceeding, it might be well to note that many West Indians lost their lives from pneumonia on board ship from the West Indies to England, and this was entirely due to the fact that they were unsuitably clothed—no warm underclothing, no overcoats and sick accommodation totally unsuitable. On arrival in Egypt, the 1st Battalion were under orders to proceed to the Western Desert to Sollum, where there had been trouble with the local natives; but the Officer Commanding this unit informed those in authority that his Battalion had not been through a Musketry Course and consequently the Battalion lost its chance of going almost into immediate active service against raw levies. Quite a large sprinkling of the N.C.O.'s and men of the 1st Battalion were old Constabulary men with a few West India Regiment soldiers amongst them. The three Battalions continued their train-

ing at Mex, where they were entirely separate units with no organization save as three complete distinct Battalions. The Regiment in Egypt suffered at once—from the day of its landing from the want of an West Indian organization behind it. Later on the three Battalions were sent down to the Canal Zone where further training was carried out and in July of the same year the 4th Battalion with mostly Jamaicans under the command of Lieut.-Colonel G. V. Hart arrived. This Battalion, almost from the day of its leaving Jamaica had extremely cruel luck; the ship was caught in a blizzard and had to put in at Halifax; she was not provided with steam heating, and hundreds of men were admitted to hospital suffering from frost bite.

With four Battalions in Egypt, it was hoped that a West Indian Brigade would be formed; and the prospects of the British West Indies Regiment looked rosy indeed. About the middle of July, a cable was received from the War Office ordering the 3rd and 4th Battalions to be sent to France at once to be turned into ammunition carriers. The Adjutant General, Major-General Adye, came and saw me personally about this matter, and explained to me that the Bermuda Volunteer Artillery had done so particularly well at this duty of shell carrying under heavy shell fire that the War Office had decided to employ two Battalions of the British West Indies Regiment on a similar duty. The War Office were also impressed by the way the Bermuda Volunteer Artillery had stuck the Winter of 1915-1916. I pointed out to General Adye that the Bermudas were not in the Tropics and did not form a part of the West Indies, that although coloured men from Bermuda may possibly stand the Winter in France, yet it did not follow that men from the West Indies would do so, and further that throughout the West Indies there is not what might be called Winter proper. Just about this time 500 men were selected from the three B.W.I. Battalions to go as reinforcements to the 2nd West India Regiment in German East Africa.

In the Autumn of 1916, the man-power question had become acute, especially in Egypt as regards men with technical knowledge, such as motor car drivers, fitters, engine drivers, mechanics, etc., and a conference was held at G.H.Q., Cairo, with a view of discussing a further exploitation of the West Indies.

The Conference met at General Headquarters at 10 o'clock on the 20th of November, 1916, and discussed the "Exploitation of the British West Indies and the further development of the British West Indies Regiment."

Present:—Major-General Lynden Bell, C.G.S.; Major-General Adye, D.A.G.; Major-General Campbell, D.Q.M.G.

Private letter to General Adye and memorandums of suggestions discussed by the Conference; also letter which had just been

received from the War Office *re* raising two further Battalions, training existing Battalions in Winter in Egypt and sending six Battalions to France in the Spring for the handling of Heavy Siege Gun ammunition.

Conference favourable to the "Exploitation" of the British West Indies; also agrees in principle that West Indians should be employed in a climate where they may work to the best advantage.

Letter to be drafted to the War Office pointing this out; also C.G.S. will write privately on the matter to General Robertson.

1st and 2nd Battalions to be moved forward and allowed to take a more active part in the proceedings in Egypt. The Conference stated that they had noticed the good work done by these Battalions. They were universally well spoken of, and the Conference were in sympathy with any movement for getting fairplay for the West Indians.

Q.M.G. was anxious to form a Mechanical Section out of the British West Indies Troops in Egypt, but it was pointed out that if this were done, two good Battalions would be mutilated by their losing some of their best men. It was finally decided to send a few selected men to be tested and to be returned to their unit.

It was pointed out to the Conference that utilizing the 3rd and 4th Battalions more or less as Labour Battalions was doing untold harm to recruiting throughout the West Indies; also that considerable dissatisfaction exists amongst the 1st and 2nd Battalions that they had completed a period of training and their work chiefly consists of guards, fatigues, garrison duties, etc., in the vicinity of the Canal. The Conference fully realizes that if the West Indies should be exploited, further contingents raised and the resources of the Islands tapped so far as mechanical engineers, etc., are concerned, it is absolutely essential for the War Office to drop the idea that the role of these men should simply be to carry ammunition and to do the general work of Labour Battalions.

Letter from General Headquarters to be written to the various Governors in the West Indies expressing favourable reports of the Commander-in-Chief, E.E.F.

News of this Conference and of the suggestion that all B.W.I. Battalions should be concentrated in Egypt was not favourably received by the various Commanding Officers of B.W.I. Battalions serving in France; the latter, after they had held a conference amongst themselves, sent a letter to the War Office protesting against the suggestion that the Officers, N.C.O.'s, and men of their Battalions objected to carrying shells. This letter further stated that the men were perfectly happy and on no account wished to return to Egypt. The War Office was thus confronted with the Egyptian Army Headquarters asking for all B.W.I. Battalions to be sent out to Egypt, and with certain senior B.W.I.R. Officers asking to be

allowed to remain in France. This want of unanimity on the part of the Commanding Officers practically killed the British West Indies Regiment. The War Office decided that the 1st, 2nd and 5th (Reserve) Battalions should be kept in Egypt; that no further reinforcements should be sent there and that all successive Contingents raised in the West Indies should be sent to France for ammunition work. In thus deciding the fate of the British West Indies Regiment, the West Indies lost the one and only chance of their manhood taking part in this great war as soldiers.

As soon as the War Office had enough West Indian shell-carrying Battalions in France, the latter Battalions were turned into pure and simple labour Battalions.

In 1917, further efforts were made to try and get the War Office to allow some of these men to fight, and the matter was eventually referred to Major-General Maurice, and through Colonel Amery, Liaison Officer between the War Cabinet and the War Office, I was informed that it was the considered opinion that the fighting qualities of West Indians were doubtful and that it was therefore preferred to use them on shell carrying and labour duties.

The tragedy in the history of this Regiment has been the entire absence of any West Indian Government Organization behind it. No organization has ever existed at the War Office specially organized to deal with the British West Indies Regiment either in France or in any of the various Bases where B.W.I.R. Troops have been concentrated. Junior Officers have come over in command of Contingents from the West Indies, some of them with an entire absence of any soldier knowledge or any knowledge of handling men, and simply by force of circumstances were given command of Battalions and made Temporary Lieutenant Colonels. There was no Regimental system of promotion amongst the officers; and consequently you have the anomaly of officers who joined up with the first contingents in 1915 still subalterns at the end of the war whilst others who joined in 1917 and 1918—some 18 months later—are Colonels, Majors, Captains, as the case may be. It was fortunate for the manhood of the West Indies that two Battalions of the British West Indies Regiment were able to participate in the fighting in Palestine and to prove to the world at large that the West Indians possess soldierlike qualities, and demonstrate once and for all that the opinion of the War Office—based goodness knows on what!—that West Indians have doubtful fighting qualities, was absolutely and entirely false.

I suppose the West Indies in round numbers, have contributed as many men as New Zealand. The New Zealanders had their Government behind them, were organised, had their own Y.M.C.A. and their own Canteens; and wherever they had been fighting, whether

in Gallipoli, Egypt, France, etc., they have always had what might be termed, a fair and square deal. There have been West Indians employed on various duties in France, Italy, Egypt, East Africa and Mesopotamia and whether one speaks to Officer, N.C.O. or man, it has always been the same tale of heart-breaking humiliation and disillusion. The fact that two battalions had at the eleventh hour taken part in the fighting has to some extent alleviated the feeling of acute depression that exists amongst all West Indians in the British West Indies Regiment, but deep down in most of the men's hearts, there is not the slightest doubt that a very bitter feeling exists against the Home Government and also against their own Government for the way they have been neglected and ill treated in this war. Hundreds of able-bodied, active young men have lost their lives from pneumonia and various chest troubles through their inability to stand the French Winter.

Early in the war it was demonstrated that the Indians were unable to do so, and they were quickly withdrawn. Had there been any organization behind the Regiment and its destiny shaped by men of vision, unquestionably, it would have been decided that the best Theatre of War for these men to fight or do labour duties in was Egypt.

When the Man-Power question became so acute and every available European soldier was withdrawn from Egypt to France, with the numbers available, it would have been possible to have had two West Indian Infantry Brigades with a Reserve Training Brigade in Egypt.

I have printed in extenso Major-General Chaytor's letter to me, which shows what he thinks of these men; and I as Commanding Officer of one of these Battalions, can only say, that having been in action with them, and having commanded the same Battalion for $2\frac{1}{2}$ years, I could not wish for a finer or better set of N.C.O.'s, and men and am proud to have associated with them. West Indians, like all other races, have their peculiarities; they may be a little bit harder to instil discipline into, but with firmness and tact, they are easy to handle and they are extremely loyal. They possess "guts," without which no man can be turned into a soldier. They are specially quick at picking up the Lewis Gun, Bombing, and the hundred and one things a modern soldier is supposed to know.

"12th October, 1918.

"Dear Colonel,

"Many thanks for the B.W.I. Calendar which is an interesting souvenir. I regret that your Battalion has left my command, but hope to be able to see both it and the 2nd Battalion at an early date to thank them for the very good work they did both when holding the

trenches in the Jordan Valley and during the subsequent operations. Outside my own Division, there are no troops I would sooner have with me than the B.W.I., who have won the highest opinions of all who have been with them during our operations here.

"Yours sincerely,
(Sgd.) E. W. C. CHAYTOR."

The First Battalion had the good fortune of serving under Lieutenant-General E. S. Bulfin, K.C.B., C.V.O., who commanded the 21st Army Corps. He is a very reserved man and says little, and I therefore think that the letter which I quote below means a great deal. He took the very greatest interest in the Regiment, and was a loyal and staunch friend of the West Indian Soldier. Just prior to leaving Egypt, when he was Commander-in-Chief during the Egyptian Unrest, I saw him at Ismailia Railway Station and in course of conversation, he told me that he heard the B.W.I.R. were leaving Egypt for the West Indies, and asked me personally to give them his good wishes and tell them how much he appreciated their services. He was sorry that the 1st Battalion had moved from his Corps whilst he was on leave in England, over to the Jordan Valley, and that he had thus been deprived of the pleasure of commanding them in the final operations. He was very proud to hear of their successes with the Anzac Mounted Division, and always knew and was fully convinced that the Regiment would acquit itself in accordance with the best traditions of the British Army.

"Lieut.-Colonel C. Wood-Hill,

"Commanding 1st Bn. British West Indies Regiment.

"I am directed by the Corps Commander to express his great regret at parting with the Battalion under your command which since the formation of the 21st Corps has been attached to it as the Corps Infantry Battalion.

"During the operations of the last two months, it has shown an excellent spirit and the duties assigned to it has been carried out very much to the Corps Commander's satisfaction.

"The soldierly bearing and smart turn out of the Battalion have been maintained under the most trying circumstances, and the fact that this applies also to detachments away from your supervision, is most creditable to all ranks.

"In addition to commanding your Battalion, you have carried out the duties of Administrative Commandant at Belah and Ramleh with much ability, and your services have been appreciated.

"The Corps Commander wishes you and all ranks of the 1st B.W.I. Regiment good luck, and should circumstances permit, would welcome the return of the Battalion to the 21st Corps.

"He desires that the Battalion may be made acquainted with the terms of this Memorandum.

(Sgd.) V. G. B. ARMSTRONG,
Brigadier-General,
D.A. & Q.M.G."

"H.Q. XXIst Corps,
"27th December, 1917."

In writing these notes on the history of the British West Indies Regiment, there are two factors that have had a disastrous effect on the life of the Regiment, from the very day of its birth to the signing of the Armistice.

Firstly, the War Office have never taken the Regiment seriously, and has always held the opinion that the West Indian would never be any use as a soldier, and that his fighting qualities are doubtful, and that in a word, he is "gutless." Hence the employment of West Indians as Shell Carriers and finally as labourers.

Secondly, the entire absence of any West Indian Government organization behind the Regiment, either in the West Indies, in England, France, Italy, Egypt, Mesopotamia or East Africa.

Had the West Indian Islands been federated, the whole history, life and being of the Regiment would have been altered. Out of evil may have come good. This is the first time on record that West Indians from various Islands have had an opportunity of meeting together, and the dismal tragedy of this Regiment has taught them a painful lesson.

The West Indies must be federated under one Governor and Government with adequate representation in London, and then a future lies before them. It is no use blaming the Home Government and the War Office entirely for all the hideous mistakes that have been made in connection with the British West Indies Regiment. The West Indian Colonies are themselves to blame for most that has happened. One of the many lessons of this war is the value of Propaganda, and there came into being a special department whose sole duty it was to inform our Allies of the full magnitude of our efforts.

The Dominion Governments were similarly equipped and faithfully served as regards full publicity being given to the exploits and deeds of their own men in the field.

The West Indian Colonies are merely groups of Islands with their own Governors and Governments, each dealing direct with the Colonial Office; they suffer from insular prejudices and jeal-

ousies, and are without any organization to represent the voice and wishes of the West Indies as a whole.

Early in 1914, most of the permanent and regular staff of the War Office were sent out to France, and substitutes hurriedly found, most of whom had little or no opportunity of studying Colonial questions and Colonial Defence Schemes.

The War Office in the early stages of the war was fully occupied with the main Theatre of War.

Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and South African Forces had their own Governments, and the latter were able to relieve the Home Government of a vast amount of work by organizing their own resources, raising their own forces, arming and equipping them and sending them to the various theatres of war as shipping facilities arose.

✕ In 1915, West Indian Contingents were sent to England and simply dumped there. No settled policy existed as to their future.

The West Indies had raised the men and it was up to the War Office and Colonial Office to do the rest. The moment the men landed in England, the West Indian Colonies appeared to think that their own responsibilities had ended. No pressure was brought to bear on the War Office to utilize a portion of the men as soldiers. If the demand for shell carriers and labourers was urgent, the call for fighting men was ever so much more so, at all stages of the war. The War Office had never been called upon to explain on what grounds they considered that West Indians would not make good soldiers.

The West India Regiment has a fine fighting record, and in the history of the Regiment, there is not a single instance of men in action not behaving in accordance with the best traditions of the British Army.

The Record of the British West Indies Regiment shows that 135 men were killed or died of wounds received in action, and that over one thousand died of sickness, mostly pneumonia, chest and lung trouble.

The wastage due to admissions to hospitals was terrible; and when the true figures are available, they will be sad reading, and prove conclusively that the average West Indian is no more able to stand the rigours and hardships of a European Winter than the Indian.

The war was fought in so many countries, with such a wide range and diversity of climate that it would surely have been possible to find one theatre of war where West Indians would have lived and worked to the best advantage.

Those Battalions that carried shells in France did splendid work, and the men behaved magnificently under shell fire, and

they frequently earned the praise of their Corps Commander and of the Batteries with whom they worked.

When a Battalion does well in the Field, the Commander is often rewarded and this is looked upon by all ranks as a Reward to the Regiment. Not a single Reward up to the signing of the Armistice for services in the field has been awarded to any Commanding Officer of a B.W.I. Battalion in France or Italy.

In every theatre of war where West Indians were employed, they were to a great extent the victims of colour prejudice. The Regiment spent a large proportion of its time in Egypt and Palestine with the 52nd (Scottish) Division, Australian and New Zealand Forces. All ranks received the utmost consideration and kindness from these Divisions and real good fellowship and friendliness existed between them and the West Indians.

For the first two years in France, bar isolated regrettable instances, there was not much to complain about.

The inclusion of Labour Battalions wearing the same uniform and Regimental Badge as the Service Battalions in France had a disastrous effect on the good name and morale of the Regiment.

On the signing of the Armistice, there was a general concentration of all B.W.I. Battalions in France and Italy at Taranto.

Here, certain regrettable incidents took place, but this is not to be wondered at when you consider that several thousand healthy young West Indians were crowded together with little or no work to do, and all of them with a grievance as regards their pay.

When all the facts are considered, it is a marvel that the men behaved with so much restraint.

Some of these Battalions, in fact one might say, most of them had not much discipline behind them. In France, they were scattered about in Detachments with their Battalion Headquarters miles in rear, and none of them had an opportunity of developing or even possessing a "Battalion Soul."

The later Battalions, from the 7th to the 11th inclusive, were merely gangs of labourers wearing the King's Uniform. Is it to be wondered at that under such conditions, from time to time, various disturbances took place?

Since the signing of the Armistice, and mostly due to misunderstanding due to demobilization, there have been outbreaks. We read of an incident at Folkestone; of R.A.S.C. men from Hounslow coming up to the War Office; of the Kimmel Park Riots, and of some thousands of men in a Demobilization Camp in Egypt taking complete charge and defying their Officers.

The Colour Question was never so much in evidence as at Taranto, and never were West Indians so humiliated and badly treated.

It is on record that several men have died from sheer neglect in No. 6 Native Labour Hospital, where Regular soldiers of the West India Regiment, of the two Battalions from Egypt and the Service and Labour Battalions in France and Italy were treated. A Cemetery wherein are buried 300 West Indians, where not a tree, shrub or flower has been planted, bears eloquent testimony to the state of affairs as regards this Hospital and to the unchristian attitude adopted to these men whether dead or alive.

One cannot close these notes without placing on record the splendid work of the West Indian Contingent Committee. The success they achieved deserves full credit and the Regiment owes them a very great debt of gratitude. The life and soul of this Committee has undoubtedly been Mr. A. E. Aspinall, C.M.G., and West Indians will never forget what he has done for them.



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