

Caribbean Service Personnel in the British Armed Forces

An Introduction by the
West India Committee

INTRODUCTION

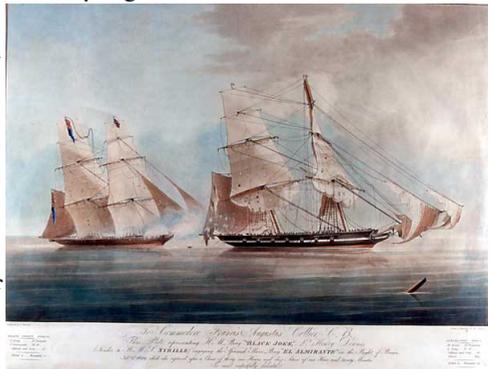
The West India Committee was founded in the City of London in 1735 and comprised Aldermen and Liverymen of various political and social views that held commercial interests in the Caribbean. Amongst them were Beeston Long, Governor of the Bank of England, and George Hibbert, Alderman of Bridge Ward, who was a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Clothworkers, as well as MP for Seaford in East Sussex.

The links between the Charity and the British Armed Forces commenced in earnest in 1767 when the West India Committee successfully petitioned King George III for assistance in securing new food sources for the Caribbean. The King responded by granting the use of *HMS Bounty* under the command

of Captain Bligh, resulting in one of the most famous mutinies in history, which has been portrayed by Hollywood in countless blockbuster movies. Two further ships were allocated to the unfortunate officer who, after seven long years, succeeded in introducing mango and breadfruit to the Caribbean, where some of the original trees still stand today.



The West India Committee supported many island militia during the early 18th century but openly opposed the founding of the West India Regiments in 1795. Although its membership held varying views on the structure of Caribbean society, the West India Committee once again successfully petitioned the Royal Navy to create the West Africa Squadron that patrolled the West African coast for over 50 years in order to block all access to the enslaved that were traded in Africa. This endeavour, which cost the lives of 1,587 servicemen, eventually led to the end of the transatlantic slave trade.





By the advent of the First World War, the West India Committee was actively supporting the men and women of the Caribbean who wished to serve in the British military, assisting the first wave of volunteers, many of whom personally paid their passage to Britain where they enlisted. By 1915, King George V intervened to overcome the reluctance of the War Office to admit West Indians into the forces for fear that it might upset the social hierarchy of the time. In November 1915, the British West Indies Regiment was founded, bearing the crown on its regimental badge with the permission of the monarch as a seal of royal approval.

The City of London also played its part, with Lord Mayor Charles Wakefield, of the Haberdashers Livery and former alderman of the Bread Street Ward, swearing in a contingent from Trinidad during the Lord Mayor's Show of 1915 and the Lady Mayoress, Sarah Wakefield, holding a tea party in their honour at the Mansion House that day. Many West Indian Servicemen frequently visited the West India Committee's Rooms in the City of London at 15 Seething Lane, where the Charity administered to their pastoral care with the support of their patron, the Princess Royal, and her mother, Queen Mary.



The Lord Mayor of London swearing in some West Indian volunteers

The West India Committee continued to support Caribbean servicemen and women in the Second World War, with the Committee acting as a postal address for many. Working in collaboration with the Royal Household, the Committee continued to raise funds for the War effort and often arranged accommodation for service personnel whilst they were on leave. The Ladies' Committee even hosted Christmas parties at which servicemen and women were welcome and, with the help of the BBC, were able to broadcast via Radio to back home in the Caribbean.



The West India Committee Christmas Party

EARLY HISTORY



Oliver Cromwell

In an attempt to break Spanish domination of the New World, Oliver Cromwell devised “*The Western Design*” and sent an Army to the Caribbean to conquer Spanish territories in the Americas. When it arrived in January 1655, between 3,000 and 4,000 West Indians, living in the early English colonies in the region, enlisted. Accordingly, many of them took part in the failed invasion of Hispaniola in April that year and, subsequently, the successful invasion of Jamaica in May under the command of General Robert Venables and Admiral William Penn. West Indians frequently served in the British Army throughout the 18th century, with many militiamen forming part of the armies that fought in the Caribbean between the colonial empires of the great European powers, mirroring the conflicts that took place in Europe.

Caribbean militias served alongside British regulars in the Nine Years’ War, under the command of Barbadian Christopher Codrington the Elder. Here they engaged in the successful recapture of St. Kitts, a defence of Jamaica from French raiders and the invasions of Marie-Galante, Guadeloupe and what is now Haiti.

The War of the Spanish Succession saw West Indian militia from Antigua, St. Kitts and Nevis, under General Christopher Codrington the Younger successfully capture Guadeloupe. All the militias provided support for the British Army and Navy in the Caribbean during such conflicts as the War of Jenkins’ Ear, the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years’ War. During the American Revolutionary Wars, the local Kittsian militia notably stood their ground in the month-long siege by the French of the great fortress of Brimstone Hill, St. Kitts, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



The siege of Brimstone Hill

Many regiments were stationed in the Caribbean for a number of years, none longer than the 38th Foot (Later the South Staffordshire Regiment), who were stationed in the region 1707-1764, the longest overseas posting in the history of the British Armed Forces. Although records are varied, many were undoubtedly recruited whilst they were in the region. The 49th Regiment of Foot was initially raised in Jamaica, and recruited from all different races on the island.



A Grenadier Guards
bandsman in Turkic
costume
from the Grenadier
Guards' Collection

From the early 18th century to the early 19th century, having a West Indian in a military band was a status symbol amongst British regiments, due to a belief in their innate musicality in an age where music was vitally important in controlling troop movements on the battlefield. They were often given exotic uniforms modelled on those of the famous marching bands of the Ottoman Empire. Fast becoming a prominent part of the Household Division, Caribbean bandsmen regularly took part in the iconic Changing of the Guard ceremony. Those in certain regiments were involved in some of the most famous campaigns in British military history. William Afflick, born in St. Kitts 1781, joined the 10th Hussars as a trumpeter and took part in the Napoleonic Wars, including the Peninsular Campaign and the battle of Waterloo.

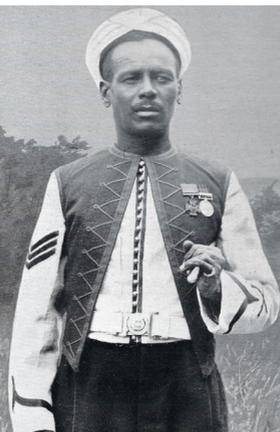
Nor was William Afflick the only West Indian soldier serving in the British Army at Waterloo. George Rose was born into slavery in Jamaica but escaped and made his way to England, where he enlisted in the 73rd Regiment of Foot. Having fought in Germany in 1813 and the Netherlands in 1814, he fought at Waterloo, where he was severely wounded in the arm. Rose continued his service in the Army after Waterloo, eventually rising to the rank of Sergeant before he was discharged in 1837.

These veterans, along with West Indian sailors, settled and started families in Britain, creating a Caribbean community over a century before the Windrush generation arrived in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Some West Indians, members of the Caribbean upper classes of wealthy planters, joined the Army as officers; for example, the brothers Douglas and James Alleyne of Barbados served in campaigns in the Crimea, India and Africa.



William St. Lucien Chase
© Australian Army Museum of Western
Australia



Sergeant William Gordon
wearing his Victoria Cross



Lieutenant Frank Alexander De Pass

A number of West Indians have been accorded the British Armed Forces highest honour for valour - the Victoria Cross. These include Henry Edward Jerome of Antigua, Herbert Mackworth Clogstoun of Trinidad, William St. Lucien Chase of St. Lucia, Samuel Hodge of Tortola (the first Black soldier to be awarded the VC), William Gordon of Jamaica, Frank Alexander De Pass of Jamaica (the first Jew to be awarded the VC) and Johnson Beharry of Grenada.

Although it is popularly thought that the first black officer in the regular British Army did not serve until the First World War, the earliest currently known is William Fergusson, who was born in Jamaica to a Scottish father and black West Indian mother in 1795. He was sent to study at the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh and afterwards joined the Army. He served in Sierra Leone from 1815, where he was stationed for the rest of his career, eventually rising to the role of Captain General and Governor-in-Chief of the then colony.

Another example of an early West Indian officer was Nathaniel Wells, a rich planter of mixed race. He settled in Monmouthshire and purchased a Lieutenant's Commission in the Lord Monmouthshire Cavalry Yeomanry militia in 1820, as well as serving as a Justice of the Peace, Sheriff and Deputy Lord Lieutenant of the county.

Numerous West Indians served in British Army regiments from the mid 17th century, but, at the end of the 18th century it was decided to form dedicated West Indian regiments to serve in the harsh Caribbean climate.

ON THE SEAS

There is less specific evidence to determine what the first Caribbean contribution to the Royal Navy may have been, but it is known that there were significant numbers of Caribbean sailors serving on both British merchant and military vessels by the end of the 18th Century. They would have undoubtedly served on British Naval vessels, including such naval actions as Admiral Vernon's attack on Portobello and Cartagena in the War of Jenkins' Ear and the siege of Havana in the Seven Years' War under Admiral Sir George Pocock. There were even West Indians present at the Battle of Trafalgar; nine are listed as having been aboard Nelson's flagship *HMS Victory*, including George Ogilvy, Jonathan Hardy, John Summers, Thomas Thomas and John Francois, the presence of West Indians being depicted on the plinth of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square.

One John Perkins who was enslaved at birth circa 1750, was taken to sea as the 'servant' of a carpenter, William Young, and served in the Seven Years' War. He left Young's service with his freedom after the war and became a naval pilot, eventually entering the Navy as a Lieutenant on *HMS Endeavour* in 1781 and took part in the Battle of the Saintes on 12th April 1782. He later saw action in the French Revolutionary War and Napoleonic Wars, eventually rising to the rank of post-Captain in 1800. Apparently, he left the Royal Navy in 1805 and settled on his own estate at Mount Dorothy, Jamaica.



Edward Atkinson

West Indian sailors in the First World War included Edward Atkinson, born in 1881 in St. Vincent. Having studied medicine at St. Thomas's Hospital, Lambeth, he joined the Royal Navy in 1908 and was one of the few survivors of Captain Scott's Antarctic expedition. Having been made Staff Surgeon in 1913, during the war Atkinson served with the Royal Navy at Gallipoli in 1915 and then with the Royal Marine Howitzer Brigade in France between 1916 and 1918. William Smith of Bermuda, then administered as part of the Caribbean, served as a cook aboard *HMS Aboukir* and

died when his ship was struck by a U-Boat torpedo on 22nd September 1914, the first Bermudan to die in the war. Commander Robert Llewellyn, born in Spanish Town, Jamaica, died aboard *HMS Queen Mary* in the Battle of Jutland.

Although the details of the story are uncertain, it appears that one West Indian, said to be from Grenada, 'William Brown', was the first black woman to serve in the Royal Navy, having disguised herself as a man to enlist after quarrelling with her husband. Her original name is unknown, but she served for a brief time in 1815 aboard *HMS Queen Charlotte* before her secret was discovered.



The West Indian contribution to the Merchant Navy in both World Wars is also notable. In particular, the number of Caymanian sailors in the Merchant Navy in the Second World War meant that the Cayman Islands had the largest number of adult men per capita - two thirds - contributing to the War effort of any of the Allied Nations. Around one hundred and fifty Caymanian sailors served in the Royal Navy, with some even mortgaging their land or selling off their livestock to pay for travel to Britain so that they could enlist.

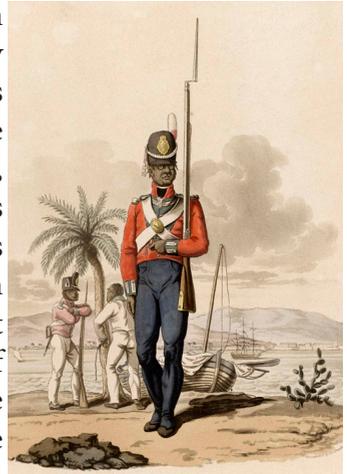
West Indians could even be found in Operation Dynamo; Keith Tibbetts of Cayman Brac, as a civilian sailor, assisted in evacuating Allied soldiers from the beaches at Dunkirk in 1940. In the Caribbean itself, where ships carrying vital supplies of oil from Trinidad were an attractive target for U-Boats, the Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve was formed and many West Indians joined to protect shipping in the region.



The Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve

THE WEST INDIA REGIMENTS

The West India Regiments were first founded in 1795 with the pressures of the French Revolutionary Wars being felt in the Caribbean. Black soldiers were noted to be more resistant to the effects of the Caribbean climate and tropical diseases. However, in order to create such a body of men, there was only one practical source for recruitment. It is estimated that between 1795 and 1808, the British Government purchased 13,400 slaves for the West India Regiments, making the British Army one of the biggest, if not the biggest, slave owners of the modern period, although, historically, other slave armies have exceeded this size.



However, the West India Regiments were not composed of the enslaved alone and, despite the concerns expressed by some officers, many free blacks and mixed-race also joined, together with whites from Britain and the Caribbean that enlisted in the rank and file. In practice, although the majority of these men had been purchased as slaves, military service was a route by which they were recognised to be free men, a fact which places the British Army in the peculiar position of simultaneously being one of the largest slave owners of all time and one of the foremost emancipators, protecting the rights of its soldiers against those who wished to keep them as mere chattels.

There was much legal debate as to whether they were still enslaved or free, but the Army treated these men as any other soldier, even decreeing in 1797 that those who were invalided were not only free men, but also entitled to a pension. The Mutiny Act of 1807 ended the debate, declaring that the soldiers of the West India Regiments were free men, effecting abolition some time before it was enacted for civilians.

During the Napoleonic Wars they saw action all over the Caribbean, including St. Vincent, St. Martin, St. Thomas, St. John, St. Croix, Martinique Guadeloupe and the Saintes, the latter where it was noted by the officer commanding the expedition that “*none were more brave or active*”. They even served in the

Louisiana campaign as part of the War of 1812, including the failed assault on New Orleans in January 1815.



The Regiments continued to serve in both the Caribbean and West Africa, where they were noted to handle the climate better than white British troops. The men served in both locations with distinction, with the Battle of Orange Walk in Guyana 1872 described as the Caribbean Rourke's Drift. They were also involved in the controversial actions made by Governor Eyre in the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865. In West Africa, the West India Regiments served against the Ashanti Confederacy in several wars over the course of the 19th century, as well as several actions aimed at tackling the African slave trade, in addition to many other campaigns.



The West India Regiment's attack on Bagwema, 1st January 1894

Their service in Africa continued during the First World War, fighting German troops in the German colonies of Togoland and Kamerun, as well as in German East Africa. The Regiments were eventually dissolved in the 1920s in response to changing defence priorities, but were briefly resurrected in the 1950s in support of the short-lived West Indies Federation. Finally, they were assimilated into the defence forces of various islands.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) was founded in 1915 in response to the overwhelming desire of people in the Caribbean to volunteer for service. Thousands had already done so before the founding of the BWIR, often paying their own passage across the Caribbean and enlisting in a variety of different services and regiments, such as Private Edward Jones of Barbados who joined the Cheshire Regiment. More famous yet was the British born professional footballer Walter Tull who served in the Middlesex Regiment.

Despite resistance from the War Office, who were not keen on a new West Indian Regiment, as they felt it would disrupt the established social and racial order of the Caribbean, the BWIR was founded thanks to the personal intervention of King George V who also gave permission for the BWIR to use the Tudor Crown on their regimental badge.



Edward Jones with a Lion statue in Trafalgar Square, London

The British West Indies Regiment was brought to Britain and was trained at Seaford in East Sussex, where a number were confirmed in the Christian faith by the Bishop of Lewes. Huts used by the servicemen whilst training in Seaford were relocated to Lewes, but will soon be demolished. Following their training in Britain, two battalions of the BWIR were sent to serve in the Middle East against the Ottoman Empire, where they fought in the Campaign to capture Jerusalem in actions at Umbrella Hill and Atawineh Redoubt, and the Jordan Valley Campaign. In this latter Campaign they were noted for their bravery



under fire, leading to one Artillery Major to comment, *“My God are they Angels or Damn Fools. Don’t they see shells? Don’t they hear shells? Don’t they know what shells are?”* Many soldiers were awarded the Military Medal or the Distinguished Conduct Medal for their actions.

The other battalions of the BWIR served on the Western Front, where they were used largely as labour battalions. Here they carried out the vital, but unglamorous, tasks of moving ammunition and creating fortifications - hard, difficult work, often carried out under enemy fire. Several men earned the Military Medal for their bravery, working in Ammunition Dumps under enemy bombardment, and rescuing boxes of ammunition from fires at considerable personal risk. They also carried out some remarkable acts of physical prowess; in one instance, 60 men were able to move 375 tons of ammunition in less than two hours. They served in some of the most famous locations of the War: Ypres, Passchendaele, Arras, Messines and Vimy Ridge.

West Indians also flew in the Royal Flying Corps. The best known is Sergeant William Robinson Clarke, who served as both an observer and pilot before he was wounded over Ypres in 1917. Lieutenant Harold 'Hal' Hunter Borden, of the Cayman Islands was shot down over France on 1st July 1918. Claude Vincent was born in St. Vincent and served in the Army before he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps in 1918; he went on to serve in the Second World War and eventually rose to the rank of Air Vice-Marshal. Jamaican Lieutenant John Daley of the 4th battalion BWIR was acting as an observer when the pilot was killed. Without having flown before, he successfully landed the plane. He later transferred to the Royal Flying Corps, winning the Distinguished Flying Cross before he was killed in an accident in July 1918.

It is notable that every one of the over 15,200 West Indians who served in the First World War was a volunteer and although conscription laws were passed in the Caribbean, they never needed to be used.

Many of those who returned to the Caribbean became leaders in their respective nations, including Tubal Uriah 'Buzz' Butler, Etienne Dupuch and Norman Washington Manley. In addition to military service, the Caribbean donated over £2,000,000 in cash towards the war effort and £54,000,000 in aid, in the form of oil, food, materials and technology, including aeroplanes and motorised ambulances.

**YOUNG MEN
OF THE BAHAMAS**

The British Empire is engaged in a Life and Death Struggle. Never in the History of England, never since the Misty Distant Past of 2,000 years ago, has our beloved Country been engaged in such a conflict as she is engaged in to-day.

To bring to nothing this mighty attack by an unscrupulous and well prepared foe, HIS MOST GRACIOUS MAJESTY KING GEORGE has called on the men of his Empire, MEN OF EVERY CLASS, CREED AND COLOUR, to

COME FORWARD TO FIGHT

that the Empire may be saved and the foe may be well beaten.

This call is to YOU, young man; not your neighbour, not your brother, not your cousin, but just YOU.

SEVERAL HUNDREDS OF YOUR MATES HAVE COME UP, HAVE BEEN MEDICALLY EXAMINED AND HAVE BEEN PASSED AS "FIT."

What is the matter with YOU?

Put yourself right with your King; put yourself right with your fellowmen; put yourself right with yourself and your conscience.

ENLIST TO-DAY

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

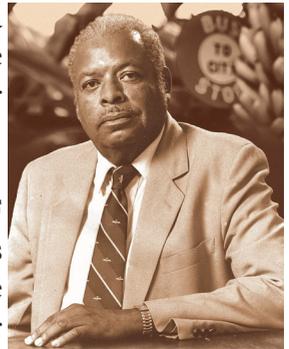


Jamaican members of the Royal Engineers 1944

Once again, many West Indians volunteered in a variety of different services and regiments. Indeed, by May 1942, West Indians could be found in over 40 different regiments. Many joined the Royal Engineers at a time when mechanical engineering skills were in high demand, and West Indian Engineers proved vital in the North

African Campaign, servicing British vehicles in the desert climate. In total, over 10,000 black West Indians joined the armed forces. The most notable West Indian contribution came in the form of the RAF, in which over 5,500 West Indians had travelled to Britain to serve as ground crew, and over 400 served as airmen by the end of the War.

Particularly notable fliers include Ulric Cross of Trinidad, who joined the RAF in 1941 as a navigator, rising to become a Flight Officer in the elite Pathfinder Force under Bomber Command. For his exemplary service, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in June 1944 and the Distinguished Flying Order the following year. He left the RAF in 1947 as a Squadron Leader and upon his return to Trinidad, he became a distinguished High Court Judge and was later the Trinidadian High Commissioner to London.



Errol Walton Barrow

Errol Walton Barrow of Barbados joined the RAF in December 1940 and was regarded as a top-class navigator. He served for a time after the war as the personal navigator of the Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir William Sholto Douglas. Upon his return to Barbados, he went into politics and became Prime Minister, leading his nation to independence in 1966.

The Caribbean Regiment was a short-lived unit formed quite late in the War, being created in 1943; a variety of factors, including their late formation, meant that they saw limited service in the conflict. They were deployed



The Caribbean Regiment in Egypt

in Italy in 1944, where they were noted for rescuing a key ammunition dump from a fire and for the speed with which they loaded equipment, much like their forebears in the First World War. However, due to a lack of large formation training, as well as an altercation that took place with American troops in Cairo on Christmas Eve 1944, they never saw combat.



Jamaican and British Honduran ATS volunteers in London 1944

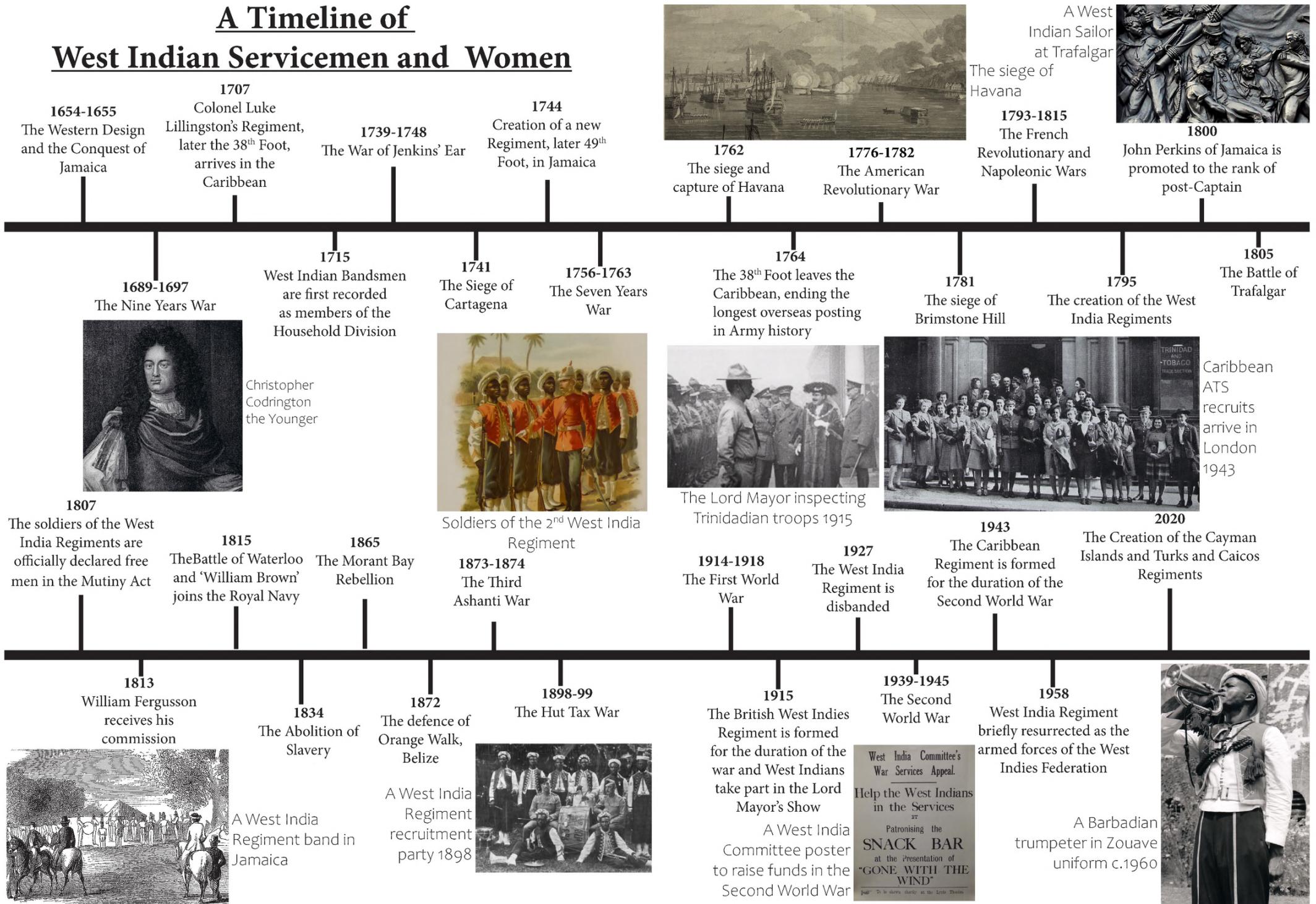
Caribbean women also made a great contribution during the conflict with over 600 joining the Auxiliary Territorial Service. This meant they served in a variety of non-combat support roles, as drivers, orderlies, clerks and, eventually, military police and Anti-Aircraft Gun Crews.

Since the Second World War, West Indians have continued to join the British Armed Forces, with the Ministry of Defence having opted, on occasion, to carry out recruitment campaigns in Commonwealth Countries and the British Overseas Territories. The British Army has Bermudan and Caribbean Regiments even today. The most recent are the Turks and Caicos Regiment and the Cayman Islands Regiment, both established in 2020. These are Territorial Units and their primary purposes are disaster relief and security. They are amongst the most recent units of the British Armed Forces.



The badges of the Turks and Caicos Regiment and the Cayman Islands Regiment

A Timeline of West Indian Servicemen and Women



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To learn more about our two books, *The Caribbean's Great War* and *The West Indian Soldier*, please email us at enquiries@westindiacommittee.org

