

West Indian Soldier:

Learning virtual exhibition tour

Teacher Notes

NATIONAL
ARMY
MUSEUM



Members of the British West Indies Regiment, First World War.

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Purpose and scope

This learning film provides a virtual tour of the National Army Museum's West Indian Soldier exhibition, curated in partnership with the West India Committee. The exhibition charts the history of Caribbean people in the British Army, and of the British Army in the Caribbean, from the period of British colonisation in the Americas to the present day. This film draws out three key topics from the exhibition narrative for KS3 History learners: Britain's transatlantic slave trade (its effects and eventual abolition), the First World War and the Second World War. The film showcases a vast number of historical sources, including objects, photographs and footage. Images of key sources presented in the film can be accessed in the accompanying downloadable PPT file, for use in learning activities. The film can be viewed in its entirety or in sections, as relevant to the topic of study. It can be used to support students' learning in both classroom or homework activities, and by teachers looking to further subject knowledge.

Curriculum links

KS3

History national curriculum links

Subjects:

- Slavery and abolition
- British Empire
- First World War
- Second World War

Knowledge:

- *Know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative...how people's lives have shaped this nation and how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world*
- *Understand historical concepts such as continuity and change, cause and consequence*
- *Gain historical perspective by placing their growing knowledge into different contexts, understanding the connections between local, regional, national and international history; between cultural, economic, military, political, religious and social history; and between short- and long-term timescales.*

KS4

GCSE unit links

- *Edexcel* – Warfare and British society, c1250 – present, British America, 1713–83: empire and revolution, Migrants in Britain, c800–present
- *AQA* – Conflict and tension: the First World War, 1894 – 1918, Britain: Migration, empires and the people: c790 to the present day
- *OCR A* –War and British Society c.790 to c.2010, The Impact of Empire on Britain 1688–c.1730
- *OCR B* – Britain in Peace and War, 1900–1918

Suggested uses

Contexts

- History lessons and homework (diversify teaching resources)
- Black History Month programming
- Tutor registration period
- Assemblies
- Displays

Focus

- Topic, e.g. Slavery
- Conflicts, e.g. Second World War
- Period, e.g. 19th century
- Individual stories, e.g. Walter Tull
- Themes, e.g. Identity

Film transcript

Introduction

Hello and welcome to the National Army Museum, where we will be taking you on a virtual tour of our new exhibition 'West Indian Soldier', curated in partnership with the West India Committee. The story of the West Indian Soldier is part of the historical relationship between Britain and the Caribbean. You might have heard the term 'West Indies' before; it's a term which was originally used by Europeans to describe the region. These days, it is often used interchangeably with the term 'Caribbean'. The Caribbean is a region in the Americas which includes over 7000 islands and cays, the Caribbean Sea and surrounding coastal areas in North, Central and South America. The Caribbean has a rich and diverse history spanning thousands of years; this exhibition focuses on the involvement of the British Army in the Caribbean, and with Caribbean people in the British Army.

Army and Slavery

In the 17th century, Britain began its colonisation of territories in the Americas, including the islands of the Caribbean and parts of Central and South America. The many territories which eventually came under the control of the British Empire included Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad. Here, the British established lucrative sugar plantations, which were worked by African slave labour. During this period, the British fought wars against other European nations, and these wars were also fought between their colonies in the Caribbean. At the end of the 18th century, this included the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. In order to fight these wars, Britain decided to recruit more men to serve in the Caribbean. This led to the creation of the West India Regiments.

Who were the soldiers of the West India Regiments?

In order to fight these wars, Britain decided to recruit more men to serve in the Caribbean. This led to the creation of the West India Regiments. The War Office decided to raise regiments of black soldiers, who were believed to be more tolerant of the climate, more resistant to tropical diseases and better suited to service in the Caribbean. The ranks of the new regiments were mostly filled with Creole and African slaves, purchased from West Indian sugar plantations or from newly arrived slave ships. They also included some men from the free population as well as European recruits. Between 1795 and 1807, estimates suggest 13,400 slaves were purchased for the West India Regiments, costing almost £1 million pounds at the time, which is between £92 million and £114 million today. This **account** details the cost of buying and clothing 272 African slaves in Jamaica for service in the 5th and 6th West India Regiments. The final cost of buying and equipping the slaves listed on this account was over £32,600, worth more than £1 million in today's money. The British Army therefore became the period's biggest single purchaser of African slaves and the largest British slave owner of the day.

Superscript 1807

Memorandum 31 March 1807

Particular Account No. 2

Being for monies paid and advanced by Matthew Murray Esq. Agent General for sale of the West India Regiments, for the purchase of 272 African slaves, intended as recruits for the 5th and 6th West India Regiments, who for clothing and provisions were to be sent to Antigua, St. Vincent, Grenada, and St. Lucia, for their maintenance during their voyage.

| | |
|---|---------|
| A. To Account paid for the purchase of 272 African slaves | |
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| 272 African slaves | |
| brought to the West India Regiments | £32,600 |
| B. To Account paid for the purchase of 272 African slaves | |
| for the West India Regiments | |
| brought to the West India Regiments | £100 |
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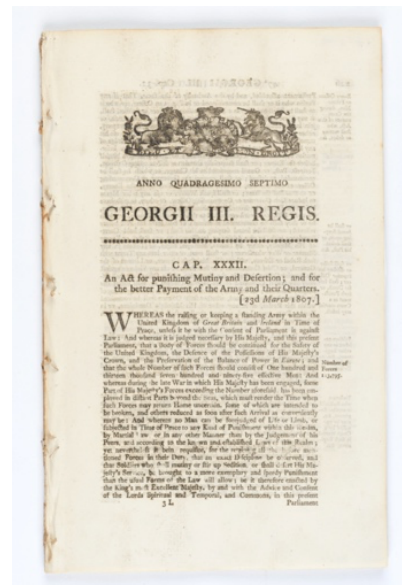
What was the status of these men once they were in the Army?

Between 1801 and 1807, there was much debate about the legal status of the West India Regiments' soldiers and whether they were subject to slave laws or not. This was at a time when the abolition of slavery had become the national debate in Britain. Once in the Army, the slave conscripts were paid and armed, and so, largely, the men felt they were in a privileged position compared to slaves on plantations. But with a lack of clarity over their status, a mutiny broke out on Dominica in 1802 amongst a portion of the 8th West India Regiment who feared being sold on to slave plantations. This **oil painting** depicts a private of the 8th West India Regiment. The painting is significant as it is amongst the earliest known oil paintings to depict an armed black soldier as the main and only subject.



What happened after the abolition of the slave trade?

Arguments about the soldiers' status continued until the **Mutiny Act of 1807**, passed two days before the bill abolishing the slave trade, finally declared the West India Regiments free men. These eight lines freed around ten thousand men immediately, the largest number of slaves liberated in the Americas in one single event to that date. This document states that these men shall be *'taken to be free... as if they had been born free'*. It marked the first major step taken by Britain to end slavery. Eventually, the use of slave labour was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833. After the abolition of the slave trade, the Army proceeded to conscript African men from foreign slave ships intercepted by the Royal Navy, which policed the West African coastline.



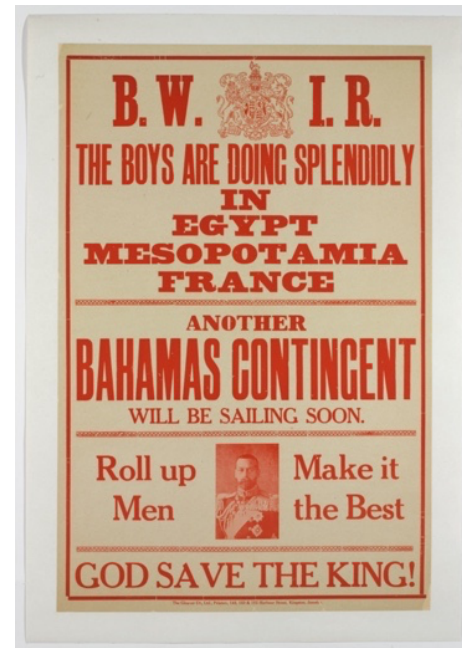
First World War

For most of the 19th century, the West India Regiments were based in the Caribbean. But, after taking part in the Third Anglo-Ashanti War in West Africa between 1873-74, they also established a base in Sierra Leone. At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the remaining West India Regiment was mobilised. The regiment served in West Africa, East Africa, and in a brief, non-fighting role in Palestine. But they were not the only West Indian soldiers to join the conflict. At the outbreak

of war, many Caribbean men volunteered to support Britain, in a variety of regiments. Then, in 1915, the British West Indies Regiment was founded.

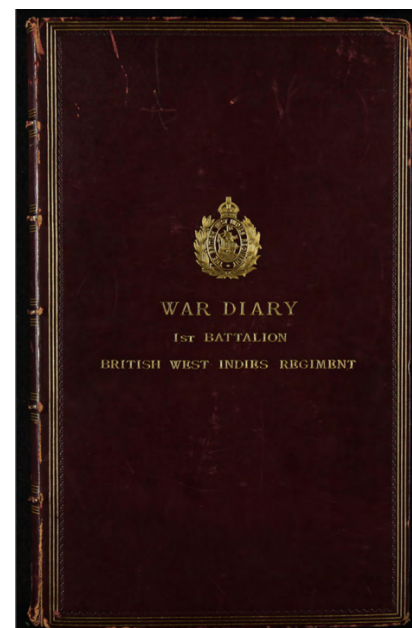
How was the British West Indies Regiment formed?

The people and governments of the Caribbean petitioned for a combat regiment to be formed. But the War Office did not want West Indian volunteers to serve in a new combat unit, instead viewing the men as potential labourers to support the efforts on the Western Front. The stalemate was eventually broken by the personal intervention of King George V, who supported the Caribbean effort and, in 1915, the British West Indies Regiment was born. Over 15,600 men volunteered and enlisted in the regiment during the war, from most of the British Caribbean. This **poster** aimed at potential recruits in the Bahamas was probably published in early 1916 after two initial 'contingents' of local men had already arrived in the listed war theatres. In total 486 Bahamians volunteered for the British West Indies Regiments, with others serving in the regular British, Canadian and American armies.



Where did the British West Indies Regiment serve?

Due to colonial policies, the War Office did not wish to have non-white troops fighting white troops. Therefore, the 1st and 2nd Battalions were sent to Egypt, with the 5th to fight the Turkish Ottoman Empire. The other Battalions were sent to Europe where they were employed as labour battalions, providing vital support alongside many British battalions on the Western Front. They served in some of the most famous battles, including the Somme and Ypres. Voiceover: This **war diary** records the experiences of the 1st Battalion of the British West Indies Regiment, from details of everyday life to the specifics of their actions in combat. This entry tells us about the death of Private G.S. Sealy on 20th May 1917: '*Observing a comrade in difficulty whilst bathing in the sea, Private Sealy gallantly swam out to his assistance but was overcome by the strength of the current and drowned in the attempt. His comrade was eventually saved*'. At the war's end, the British West Indies Regiment was sent to Cimino Camp at Taranto, Italy, to await passage home. Here they were subjected to degrading and racist treatment from certain officers, including being asked to dig latrines for civilian Italian labourers, as well as being initially denied a pay rise awarded to other troops. This led to a mutiny. The British West Indies Regiment were escorted home under armed guard and were not allowed to participate in the Victory Parade in London.



What role did West Indians play in other Army regiments?

White West Indians were often able to become officers, such as Second Lieutenants E.C. Beecher (Dominica), 1st Wiltshire Regiment, and A.J. Bernard (Trinidad), Royal Warwickshire Regiment. Voiceover: Yet a colour bar still existed for officers, denying many black West Indians an officer's commission. G.O. Rushdie-Gray, Jamaica's Chief Veterinary Officer, was denied a position in the Veterinary Corps due to his skin being 'too dark'. Despite this, some West Indians of African ancestry managed to become officers, including Walter Tull, born in Britain, and Euan Lucie-Smith, from Jamaica. Here, we have a **memorial plaque**, known as the Dead Man's Penny, issued to the family of Second Lieutenant Euan Lucie-Smith. Euan Lucie-Smith served in the 1st Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment. In March 1915 he travelled to France, where he was killed in the Second Battle of Ypres on 25 April 1915, aged 25.



Second World War

The British West Indies Regiment was disbanded shortly after the First World War ended in 1918, as was the West India Regiment in 1927. But this did not mark the end of West Indian service in Britain's armed forces. In the Second World War, the Caribbean made a major contribution not only in the Army, but also other services, most notably the RAF. In 1944, the Caribbean Regiment was formed, travelling to Egypt in October 1944. This was as part of the garrison protecting the Suez Canal. The regiment remained here until the end of the war, though they did not fight. Voiceover: In addition to men, Caribbean women served in the Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service, or ATS. The ATS was formed in 1938 as the threat of war increased to free up male soldiers for the front line.

What role did West Indian women play in the ATS?

Six hundred West Indian women volunteered to join the ATS; half stayed in the Caribbean while 100 served in Britain. These **photographs** highlight some of the roles that the women took on: on this photograph, we can see women working in library in Trinidad; some Caribbean women served in Britain as clerical workers and telephonists. Other women served as cooks and drivers. They also staffed anti-aircraft guns and barrage balloons. West Indian women already living in Britain worked as nurses and in factories; this photograph shows women working in a store, while here we can see a group of nurses standing outside a hospital. Back in the West Indies, women helped the war effort by working in hospitals and agriculture.





What challenges did West Indian women in the ATS face?

ATS women in general were not treated the same as men; they received less pay than male soldiers and were subjected to derogatory comments. But black women from the West Indies had to overcome the additional challenge of institutional prejudice. They were initially rejected as recruits by the War Office because of their race, and later faced the prejudiced argument that they would find it difficult to adapt to the climate and culture of Britain. But the growing demand for service personnel and Colonial Office pressure for a non-discriminatory recruitment policy ended this. The War Office was more reluctant to recruit black people than the Colonial Office though, and this delayed the arrival of the women. It was not until 1943 that the first contingents of West Indian women to serve in Britain's armed forces arrived. In this **photograph**, we can see women who have recently arrived in Britain, wearing civilian



What was serving in the ATS like as a West Indian woman?

(Ena Collymore-Woodstock interviewed alongside her daughter)

- *I think our group was the first of the first, of the groups...*
- *Her group was the first to leave the West Indies – first group of women to leave the West Indies to go to the war, to volunteer to go to the war. Then, when they got there, they had them typing. That's when she said – you didn't want to type, you didn't come to England to type; she wanted to be in the war. Most of the women who came from the West Indies, they were happy to stay in London and type, or whatever they had them doing. But that Mummy had wanted to go – Ena – wanted to go off and do more. She said, she had told them she was there a month, she hadn't done anything; she wanted to do something more.*
- *Yes.*
- *That's when she trained to be a radar operator, the Anti-Aircraft.*

Conclusion

Today, many of the Caribbean nations which were formerly part of the British Empire are independent countries – including Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago, Voiceover: but remain as part of the Commonwealth. Others, such as Anguilla, Montserrat and the Cayman Islands, are British Overseas Territories. Caribbean people continue to serve in the British Army, being recruited from the region itself or from Britain's Caribbean communities. The Army also continues to operate in the Caribbean, providing aid in response to natural disasters, as well as undertaking training in Jamaica and Belize. Voiceover: In Britain, the 21st century has seen growing calls for the recognition of the contributions made by West Indian servicemen and servicewomen to the British Army, particularly in the First and Second World Wars. Visit the National Army Museum and the West India Committee websites to explore the story of the West Indian Soldier further and access our digital learning resources. Thank you for coming on this tour; we hope to see you at the Museum and West India Committee UNESCO library soon!